Movement in Contemporary Staged Adaptations of the Alevi *Semah*s (1982-2018)

Volume 1 of 2

Submitted by Sinibaldo De Rosa,
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I certify that all material in this thesis which is not my own has been identified and that no material has previously been submitted and approved for the award of a degree by this or any other University.

Signature: …….

Abstract

The *semah*s are musical and movement practices enacted at the core of religious ceremonies called *ayn-i cem* which Alevis communities perform to fulfil diverse social and spiritual needs. As part of urbanization, migration, folklorization and heritage-making processes, since the 1970s, in urban environments of Turkey and Europe, these practices started to be adapted and performed also outside of these ritual contexts. As part of folklore and of professional performing arts projects, both Alevis and non-Alevi actors and dancers started to learn and perform the *semah*s on the stage. In this way, the practices became a summative emblem through which the core tenets of the Alevi belief systems and cultures and its resistant stance towards the national imagination came to be divulged and promoted to audiences of Alevis and non-Alevis alike. Paying attention to some of the public and professional performances of the *semah*s outside of the ritual context, in this thesis I argue that since the 1980s, the adaptation of the *semah*s into performing arts frameworks had a pivotal role in the contemporary 'explosion' of Alevi identities in Turkey and internationally. To sustain the argument, through the presentation of ethnographic material gathered during long-term and multi-sited fieldwork research, I analyse three performing arts projects. Resorting to scholarship in Anthropology, Performance, and Dance as well as to critical application of Laban-related movement analysis methods, I show how each of these stage projects displays a different layer in the imaginative re-workings and stylizations of the *semah*s on a transnational scale. Accordingly, by examining historical changes in the transmission of *semah* movements and participation in *semah* events, I impart new knowledge on themes of embodiment, interactivity, participation and presentation within Alevi cultures.

Note on Language[1]

The use of Turkish follows the orthography of modern Turkish. The pronunciation is as follows:

Turkish	*English*
C	similar to *g* as in *genius*
Ç	similar to *ch* as in *cheers*
Ş	similar to *sh* as in *shoe*
S	similar to *s* as in *sun*
G	similar to *g* as in *golden*
Ğ	silent-to-guttural
K	similar to *c* as in *cat*
J	similar to French *j*
Ö	similar to German *ö* or French œ
Ü	similar to German *ü* or French *u*
Y	similar to the *y* in *yarn*
I	similar to the *i* in *if*
İ	similar to *ee* in *feel*
Z	similar to *s* as in *roses*

Titles are capitalized just when they refer to a specific person or when they are used next to a name (i.e. Hilme Dede). They are not capitalized when they are used more generically or as a concept.

Turkish, an agglutinative language, uses a system of vowel harmony; to avoid what may appear to be inconsistencies in the ortography (e.g. the plural of *semah* is *semahlar* while the plural of *cem* is *cemler*) I have anglicised plural forms by adding a final -s to the generic form of Turkish nouns which have been written in italics.

Turkish is a gender-neutral language. For instance, the Turkish pronoun *o* is equivalent of the English *he*, *she* and *it*. In absence of genuine gender-neutral singular pronouns in English, I have tried to implement the used of *she* or *her* as gender-neutral forms, although I am aware that they are grammatically gendered.

[1] The note has been modeled on the one in Mandel (2008).

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Acknowledgements and Preface

Acknowledging all the people, places, and institutions who have contributed to this research is a difficult task and one probably not truly representative of my own intentiontions as I draw the finish line to mark the conclusion of this project. It would not be accurate to write that myriads of encounters, inputs, and exchanges were the means to the final objective of writing this thesis. On the contrary, I feel that it is this thesis that served as the pretext for my travels and movements, for meeting and connecting with unique individuals and families, often sharing with them the experience of visiting or inhabiting precious places, for periods of time, sometimes short, other times long. In other words, rather than acknowledging these encounters for having contributed to the writing of this thesis, I wish to acknowledge how this thesis provided the backbone for these encounters, which I genuinely cherish as the most important accomplishment of the project. Accordingly, I take this occasion to indicate how this PhD project permitted me to grow through meetings with remarkable individuals. Such was the real objective I have pursued throughout the research process and hope to keep following in the future.

Although writing has often been a powerful way to connect with people, the time that it demands often isolated me from beloved people and places, not only my family members and friends from Abruzzo, but also those who were directly involved in different capacities in the research. For this reason, I wish to recognise their loving encouragement, patience and careful waiting. I am especially indepbted to the many people whose caring support enabled the completion of this project, even if they are not proficient enough in English to be able to read this

thesis. As for those who dare to read it, I just hope they will not get too bored by it. This project led me to connect with a vast array of people who remain nameless, often not only in these chapters, but also in my field notes and memory. A significant portion of my fieldwork consisted of countless fortuitous encounters that occurred indipendent of any expectation or plan. Many of these encounters happened on the move. Some took place within the duration of a chat over a long journey by bus, or even while cueing to board on a flight. Some turned into 'friendships' online, connections whose exact initial circumstances became, with time, hard to pinpoint amid my lists of friends on social media. Others remain vivid in my written and bodily memory, and I can recall precisely the lesson I took away from a given encounter, if not, perhaps, the keywords with which I presented my research topic during the conversation. Ethnographic research meant allowing myself to become a repository into which others would inscribe their own story. Sometimes these stories streamed out serendipitously, prompted by a fellow passenger's surprise to learn that the Italian guy sitting next to them was researching Alevi movements, inspiring the disclosure of stories that had remained sealed inside family safes and would not have been shared yet with a non-Alevi. I am thankful for all these nameless inscriptions which bestowed upon me the role of some sort of archivist. However, more than just becoming a detached subject specialist, I hope to do my best as a caretaker and advocate for those experiences. Some encounters led to further meetings, to the partaking of meals or trips together with newfound friends. One day, while hitchhiking with my friend Andrea from Amasya back to Ankara, a father and son had given us a ride and turned out to be a family of eager musicians who had recently relocated to Ankara after many years in Germany. The lucky coincidence led, a few weeks later, to an invitation for dinner

at their place on the way to Gölbaşı in the southern outskirts of Ankara, where chance ordained that I would get my first ever *bağlama* lesson. As thankful as I am for these encounters, many of the names of those who made them possible have now slipped away. Sometimes, meeting someone in person or online led us to share flats, and there are so many places and houses where I have lived over the period of this research. many of the people I met and the places I dwelled throughout the meanderings, are somehow encapsulated in this thesis.

If it was not for this project, I would not have met several performers and scholars whose work coverged in the staged performances analysed. Without these encounters, I would not have matured as a person and a researcher. If it was not for the research that led to the writing of Chapter 5, I would not have spent time in one of the most intimate - and cherished - theatre spaces that I have even visited: the tiny studio of the Ankara Deneme Sahnesi in Batıkent, Ankara. I arrived at that space at the suggestion of Güzin Yamaner, with whom I had connected after the recommendations of Eugenio Barba and Julia Varley and the kind facilitation of Francesca Romana Rietti during a visit to the Odin Teatret in Holstebro, Denmark. In Batıkent, at the Western outskirts of Ankara, the late Nurhan Karadağ welcomed me to this tiny studio, making me feel comfortable while sipping tea and observing and participating to rehearsals for the piece *Kardeşlik Töreni - Samah*. Karadağ then enabled me to witness the presentations of the piece, both from the backstage as well as from a couple of different auditoriums in Ankara, thus also accepting to discuss his work in a recorded interview with me back in 2011. I dedicate this work to Karadağ's artistic and scholarly work which has always had a profound impact on me. In that studio, I also met many professional and amateur theatre practitioners who in different capacities engaged with the activities of the Ankara

Deneme Sahnesi. With them, I shared many inspiring conversations which informed my writing. In particular, I should mention here Arzü Yolgösteren, Ulaş Karadağ, Umay Karadağ, Ceren Kahraman, Taşkin Ermişoğlu, Hatice Erdoğan and Ezgi Durak. Yusuf Sağlam spent hours sharing his experience and knowledge with me, and then often revised my transcriptions of our recorded conversations to make sure that I got right all the information that he had shared with me. Throughout the years, the support and sympathy of Yusuf, as well as of his wife, have been very significant. Selçuk Göldere shared his expertise and choreographic vision during meetings which happened in Ankara, then in Cappadocia, as well as in Remscheid, Germany, and in England. In particular, Selçuk clarified details of some of the movements within the piece *Kardeşlik Töreni - Samah* at the time when I was working on the notation of some of its fragments. It was then a delight to learn that my study of this notation inspired him to start learning the Kinetography Laban and that he enrolled in the same program where I studied at the CNSMDP in Paris. After years of hearing about them, finally over Winter 2017-2018 in Istanbul, I was able to meet and record an interview with two inspiring women who had contributed to the initial realization of *Kardeşlik Töreni - Samah* in the early 1980s: Belgin Aygün Çifçioğlu and Şule Ateş. Both Belgin and Şule have been extremely generous in sharing their reflections on that early experience and on the routes that led from there to the development of their work in academia and in the theatre industry, respectively.

If it were not for the research that came together in Chapter 6, I would not have had the chance to meet the inspirational and versatile artist Mazlum Çimen who, thanks to the help of his assistant Yaşar Bayram Gül, welcomed me to his studio in Örtakoy, Istanbul. In Ortaköy, we shared the most delightful *muhabbet*

during which Mazlum unravelled his career as a musician, ballet dancer, choreographer and music producer, his work as artistic director for *Doğa Aşkına* and his perspectives on Alevi origins and rituals, as well as on movement notation. In Seferhisar, Izmir, Güven Eken hosted me in the pleasing premises of an ecovillage which was also called *Doğa Aşkına*. On that occasion, Güven picked me up at an inconveniently late hour and welcomed me with tea, delicious watermelon, and cheese as a supplement to our conversation. Sibel Güneş opened the doors of one of her *semah* classes in the *cemevi* in Bondy, also sharing her experience as a *semahcı* and *semah* teacher operating in the Paris area. Also in Paris, back in 2014, meetings with Françoise Arnaud-Demir were enlightening and encouraging. Additionally, Françoise urged me to take my first systematic lesson in playing the *bağlama* with her husband Mahmut Demir, who also provided me with my first *bağlama*. Sharing a flat and many chats with Emre Bayraktar has been a delight, and a source of reflection on what it means to be son of a Turkish father and a linguist, without speaking Turkish. Other generous friends hosted me in Paris, especially Eric Perrot, Luis Fernando Urrego, Erika Rava, and Sophie Alice Sarcinelli, among others. I have had the good fortune of sharing a lot with my friend Chiara Calzolaio, and learning from her a great deal about understanding and resisting subtle and ubiquitous forms of violence and injustice.

Thanks to the research that lead to the writing of Chapter 7, I had the opportunity to encounter and explore the work of Bedirhan Dehmen and of several dancers who worked with him on *"biz"* and on some of his other choreographic pieces. Since we met, Bedirhan has been very encouraging and generous. His support ranged from agreeing to meet before or just after his shows and lectures and inviting me to the premieres of his new pieces to promoting and participating

in a talk that I gave at the Orient Institut Istanbul in December 2017 within which *"biz"* was also discussed. Apart from him, his wife Mine Tan, as well as his extended family, have been extremely hospitable, whether receiving me at their home for late night visits filled with lively chats until the wee hours, or inviting me to the very merry celebration held for the *sünnet* of their son, Ali Mihtat, a memorable night during which we shared lots of joyful drinking and dancing. In the context of this chapter, I should mention also the courtesy of Alexandra Ivanoff, who retrieved for me a review that she had written for *"biz"* which was no longer available online. To write about the interface of Alevi cultures and the contemporary dance scene in Istanbul however, meetings with other key people and my own enrolment in dance classes in Istanbul have been crucial. In particular, I wish to acknowledge the time that Yeşim Çoşkun of the group Mesopotamya Dans dedicated to me. Yeşim invited me to one of her classes in the studio of Moda Sahnesi in Kadıköy, and allowed me to record an interview with her that has been extremely informative and revitalising for my thinking. Over Spring 2018 I thus watched three of the pieces choreographed by Mesopotamya Dans, growing fond of their work, and learning more through them about the wonderful life and career of the Kurdish princess and dancer Leyla Bedirhan (1903-1986). Because of its engagement with Alevi *semah* traditions and its attention to Kurdish lineages within them, Çoşkun's choreographed piece *4 Kapı 40 Makam* should have been discussed within this thesis. However, although I started producing brief sketches with the Kinetography Laban of this piece, I regret that I came to discover this piece too late to include an analysis of it within this thesis. I certainly hope to take on such an endeavor in the future. Meetings with the choreographer Serkan Bozkurt and with light designer Ulaş Yatkin have also been very illuminating. Enrolment in

dance classes in Istanbul has been rejuvenating and instructive. I especially gained a lot from joining capoeira classes at the Şiddetsizlik İletişim Merkezi (Non-violent Communication Centre) with the teachers Nil Delahaye, Hüseyin Korkma, and Fay Magnusson, from modern and contemporary dance at Akbank Sanat led by many talented teachers (I am especially thankful for the friendship and delightful company offered by Melissa Ugolini and Beril Şenoz here), and from ballet with Ayşe Ceren Sarı, as well as other styles at ÇATI.

In London, between 2015 and 2016, the research needed to write this thesis has been a pretext that gave meaning to my enrolment in *semah* and *bağlama* classes at the Cemevi in Dalston, a centre which has now expanded and relocated up north to Wood Green. All the soulmates (*can*) with whom I spent time there have made me richer than I was before. At the *cemevi*, the classes were led by very caring and committed teachers: Seher Ağbaba, Bariş Baran, and Saffet Yürükel. I hope to have absorbed some of their untiring commitment to letting music and movement make one's heart more tender and more human. In London, and then during a festival on 'Alevism and Semah' in Cambridge, beyond what my teachers imparted, I learned a lot by sharing time and feelings with fellow *bağlama* players and *semahcı*s of all ages. Gönül Ekmekçi welcomed me to participate in singing during rehearsals of the group *Nefes*, an experience that I enjoyed a great deal. In London, I have been lucky to be a regular guest of very openhearted friends. Oya Bacak has exceeded even the highest standards of Turkish hospitality in Britain, sharing meals and dance classes, acting as guinea pig for my reconstruction of movement scores from notation and eliciting from me shivers and laugher as I watched some of her shows. More than always leaving the door open, Andrea Mura has provided me with the best physical and mental space for getting writing

done, and has always offered timely and trustworthy advice. When I needed it the most, Maria Teresa Vicaretti and Scott Daniels welcomed me in East Dulwich, and I doubt I would have obtained a scholarship back in 2014 had they not forced me to go through a mock interview the day before the successful one.

In Istanbul, at the Şahkulu Sultan Dergahı in Göztepe, I was welcomed to join a *mühabbet* with Dertli Divani and members of the transnational *bağlama* players network Mekteb-i İrfan. On another occasion, I was able to participate in a *semah* class, the name of whose teacher I have lost. Both experiences enriched me a lot. Here I also met a kind and well-informed person, Aydın Ayhan, whose availability and responsiveness to my queries was invaluable to my work. Thanks to Aydın, in August 2018, I finally met Nasuh Barın, who graciously picked me up after a journey by ferry from Istanbul to Bandırma, where over a toast and many teas he shared the gentlest memories and photographic documentation from his career in dance and writing, bringing me up to speed as well on his current and future projects. Throughout the years, since I first met him in 2011, İlhan Cem Erseven has always been very supportive of my research and forthcoming with profusion of teachings, some of which he enhanced with extemporaneous drawings that I value enormously. I was able to visit several *cemevi*s in Ankara, at times joining *semah* classes, other times participating in the *cem* rituals or *mühabbet*s. Back in 2012, I learned a lot through Duygu and Alkan's comments on my notes about a *cem* ritual which Alkan's parents, Riza Dede and Yasemin Hanım, had organised in a *cemevi* in Sıhhiye, Ankara. In 2011, during a visit to the Tomb of the Saint Abdal Musa in Tekkeköy in the district of Elmalı, Antalya, I had an enchanted and instructive *muhabbet* with Utkuhan Eroğlu and his family. Still in the district of Elmalı, in 2015, after the recommendation of Françoise Arnaud-

Demir, Serdar Tanal and his family hosted me in their organic farm in the village of Akçaeniş. Beyond allowing me to access his rich video archive of *cem* rituals and *semah* enactments, Serdal offered an example of how one's Alevi cultural background can synergistically resonate with innovative ecological farming and agriculture techniques. I certainly hope to come back again for a longer visit in the future.

In various stages, just before or during the years of the PhD work, several scholars responded to my queries, offered me advice, or gave me feedback on papers presented in various conferences and symposiums. The writing of this thesis has in fact permitted me to be in touch with inspiring scholars, some of which should be mentioned here. Ayfer Karakaya-Stump offered advice on tracing some mentions of the *semah* and associated body movements in historical records. Seyhan Kayhan Kılıç draw my attention to several beliefs and practices related to the use of space in the context of Alevi and Bektaşi rituals. Besim Can Zirh drew my attention to an important detail related to references to the *lokma* ('morsel') in the context of the voluntary participation of the artists within *Doğa Aşkına*. Arzu Öztürkmen provided me the names and contact details of key scholars and teachers working on Alevi cultures, folklore, and movement notation in Turkey, and instilled in me the feeling that the research I was on was worthy. At the Institut Française des Études Anatoliennes (IFEA), Elise Massicard gave me some initial suggestions on how to channel my Research Master's thesis into a PhD project. Years later, Armand Aupiais and Lydia Zeghmar have been fun colleagues with whom I shared not only debates and writers' retreats, but also volleyball matches in the breaks, and capoeira, modern dance, and ballet classes. I am grateful for the friendship of Feliz Çelik who first put me in touch with Martin Greves; I regret

that we did not meet as many times as I had imagined we would, although Bristol and Swansea are not really that far. My confidence was certainly boosted after Martin Stokes expressed excitement for my project at the time when I was writing a PhD proposal, especially given my high esteem for his erudition on contemporary Turkish music and cultures. Mark Soileau answered a query on the use of the terms *raks* and *oyun* in the historical hagiographies of Alevi saints.

Among the scholars who converge in the Dance Studies Association (DSA), Anthony Shay has shown throughout the years the utmost enthusiasm for my project and once wrote a reference letter to support my PhD candidacy; I hope to have absorbed at least a little bit of the artistry and scholarly ethos that he conveys in his books, several of which he offered to me as a present back in 2013. More than giving precious feedback on a paper that I had presented in Athens back in 2015, Naomi Jackson also bestowed upon me a valuable resource: Rebecca Rossen's *Dancing Jewish* (2014), a book that I finally did not manage to include in the references. Hanna McClure showed interest and curiosity in my work, inviting me to work on a panel that she organised at the University of Surrey in October 2015, and then consenting to lead a workshop on Sufi whirling at the Drama department in Exeter. I much learned from the work and person of Priya Thomas, a multi-layered scholar, teacher, and artist of rare type.

In the context of the International Council of Traditional Music (ICTM), I had insightful conversations with many scholars, but especially with those working in the field of Alevi music, such as Alex Kreger and Manami Suzuki. I am indebted to the expert mentorship and warm friendship offered by Irene Markoff, certainly one of the most generous and amiable teachers that I ever encountered, and the most delightful companion for nights over music and *meze*s. Both Paul Koerbin and

Melanie Pinkert showed an interest in collaborating on the organisation of a panel on Alevi expressive cultures, even though finally we have not managed to realize this project (yet). The committed scholars contributing to the activities of the ICTM study group on Ethnochoreology have sharpened my thinking on the study of folk and popular dancing, and I will always be grateful to the late Andrée Grau for inviting me to join this group. It is difficult to express in few words how much debating my project with her during the early stage of the research filled me with a sense of scholarly duty, combined with feelings of security, excitement, and joy. I dedicate this work as well to her trailblazing wisdom and warm-hearthed generosity. It was in the context of the Ethnochoreology study group that I came to meet Fahriye Dinçer, a key scholar whose PhD study I was not yet familiar with yet when I started this project. Fahriye has been an extremely sympathetic and cheerful presence for me, offering detailed feedback on a paper which I had presented in the 44th ICTM conference in Limerick and giving me expert advice on how to navigate research objectives situated between the study of dance and Alevi cultures. Belma Kurtişoğlu also offered precious advice on conducting research in the field of folk dancing in Turkey, and organised an excellent introductory workshop on the Kinetography Laban, which I presented at the Turkish Music Conservatory of Istanbul Technic University in December 2016. I learned a great deal from Helene Eriksen, a unique dancer and teacher who enriches the dance world with a refreshing and invigorating model for applying the study of ethnochoreology beyond academia.

Reaching beyond the confines of body movement analysis, my teacher of Kinetography Laban, Nöelle Simonet, showed me what work done with diligence and persistence can lead to. Spending many hours with Nöelle and beloved fellow

Kinetography apprentices in the beautiful studios of the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique et Danse de Paris (CNSMDP) is without any doubt one of the most enriching experiences that I have undergone in my life. In Paris, I also benefited enormously from the support of Jacqueline Challet-Haas and Marion Bastien at the Centre National de la Danse. Angela Louriero devoted hours to analysing video material of selected *semah*-related performances with me. The context of the International Council of Kinetography Laban (ICKL) has been extremely inspiring, and I am especially lucky to have had exchanges with colleagues who are participants in both ICKL and the ICTM, such as Maria Varendht and Raymundo Ruiz. In June 2017, under the auspices of the GW4 Doctoral Training Scheme, I absorbed many new skills by organising and participating in an introductory PhD workshop on Laban Movement Analysis (LMA), which Jean Johnson Jones kindly agreed to lead in the Drama department at Exeter. Jean offered insightful comments and advice regarding my project, extending her support beyond the time allotted to the workshop.

For 2017 and 2018, the Max Weber Stiftung awarded me with a PhD research grant that allowed me to work in the refreshing environment of the Orient Institut in Istanbul (OII). There, I was spoiled by the abundance of expert support - from the Institut's director Raoul Motika, from several committed scholars-in-residence, and from the ever helpful administrators and librarians. Martin Greve served as an ideal mentor, providing me with guidance and recommendations in the field of transnational Turkish and Alevi contemporary music, as well as with practical daily advice on how to strike a balance between life, research, and writing. Martin offered extensive suggestions on how to organise the material in the thesis and offered precious feedback on an earlier version of Chapter 7. Also, my

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friend: Andrea's kindness and encouragement extended far beyond giving me feedback on chapter plans and drafts as she offered novel perspectives on critical issues such as cosmopolitanism, transnational belonging, and the presentation of ethnographic material, especially in the context of Chapter 6. I learned much from Hüseyin Arslan's knowledge in the fields of material and religious history between the Ottoman and the Safavid Empire. I was delighted to meet again Nevin Şahin with whom I had studied at the Middle East Technical University, and to learn about her more recent studies on *makam* music. Finally, I am thankful for having studied with and having learned so much from Sevi Bayraktar, again a fellow DSA and ICTM member, who is unquestionably is one of the finest dancers and brightest scholars of dance and activism in Turkey I met.

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Concert Event in Paris: Doğa Aşkına – Terre, Mon Amour in *Turkish Migration 2016 Selected Papers*, edited by Deniz Eroğlu, Jeffrey H. Cohen, and Ibrahim Sirkeci for Transnational Press London (2016, pp. 216-223). With respect to my references, I have followed the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute (JRAI)* style of referencing for in-text citations and the UWE Bristol Harvard standard for the bibliography. In the bibliography, I have distinguished the academic sources from documents obtained through fieldwork research, including recorded interviews, online and video material, leaflets, reviews, and non-academic publications. All titles in Turkish within the bibliography have been translated into English. The total word count for this thesis is 98718 words (52989 in Volume 1 and 45729 in Volume 2). This excludes the abstract, list of contents and figures, acknowledgments and preface, footnotes, appendices, and bibliography.

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1. Introduction: Aleviness, movement and adaptation

1.1 Research Statement and Questions

In his *Pictorial History of Turkish Dancing* published in 1976, Metin And, the distinguished scholar of Turkish performing arts, popular games and magic, introduced the reader to the *semahs* by presenting them as religious social dances taking place within the rituals of the Alevis and Bektaşis.

> These are jealously guarded dances, which are performed at secret indoor meetings, impenetrable by the uninitiated. This is not due to any need or desire for secrecy but simply because they are people despised by orthodox Moslems in the neighbourhood and they find it unsafe to have their meetings in the open. (And 1976:44).

The book was the first to provide accurate descriptions in English of the *semah* movements, which contributed to softening the secrecy that surrounded these dances. During the 1970s the *semah*s started to be discussed as part of folklore studies in theatre and music, as well as to be removed from their ritual setting and performed as traditional dances in secular contexts, such as university folklore groups. Formerly, the Alevis had often disguised their own identity and ritual practices, and the *semah*s had not always been understood as 'dances'. These developments were part of the migration and urbanization processes transforming social life in Anatolia, as well as the organisation of Alevi communities and ceremonies. Despite their novel enactment in secular contexts since the 1970s, the *semah*s were enacted, and still are today, at the core of religious ceremonies called *ayn-i cem*, an Arabic expression that is normally translated as 'ritual of communion', and that is often shortened as *cem*. Performed during several

calendrical occurrences, these rituals fulfil diverse social and spiritual needs of Alevi communities.

The *semah* can be defined as both a set of bodily and group movements and the spiritual songs that accompany them. The movements are executed by a group of men and women often referred to as *semahcı*s. While progressing on a circular line in counter-clockwise direction, these stand upwards and perform varied and well-defined arm gestures. In synchronicity to the music, the *semahcı*s may also pivot while progressing on the circular path. At times, they may slightly shrink and then get back to the original size of the circle. They most commonly take care not to display their back to the area out of the circle where the community leader or priest, often referred to as the *dede*, and the musicians, often called *zakir*s, are sitting. Rather than a fixed and singular form however, the *semah* is better understood as a 'genre' embracing many variations and local styles. Among others, Metin And had explained the word by tracing it to the Arabic *samā'*, a Sufi term used to indicate the practice of listening to music and chanting to attain a state of religious emotion and ecstasy (*vecd)*, of which the movements constitute an outcome (1976:38). Another meaning of the word is 'sky': correspondingly, the turning in circles would display an elementary interpretation of the cosmic order of the world, such as the circling of celestial bodies in the solar system.

Since the 1970s, in the official and historical capitals of Turkey, Istanbul and Ankara, as well as abroad, the *semah*s started to be adapted and performed also outside of these ritual and folkloric contexts, as part of professional performing arts projects. On the stage, the *semah*s were performed by non-Alevi actors too, becoming a summative emblem through which the core tenets of the Alevi belief systems and cultures were divulged to audiences of Alevis and non-Alevis alike.

Paying attention to some of the public and professional performances of the *semah*s outside of the ritual context, in this thesis I argue that since the 1980s, the adaptation of the *semah*s into performing arts frameworks had a pivotal role in the contemporary 'explosion' of Alevi identities in Turkey and internationally. To sustain the argument, I will analyse three performing arts projects, each displaying different layers in the imaginative re-workings and stylizations of the *semah*s.

Discussion of the *semah*s in terms of movement and contemporary staged adaptations helps us to appreciate how the Alevi public culture has been socially constructed. More often than not, the 'alevi' category is used indeed as an ethno-religious marker and conceived as a stable given. However, because ethnicity is better understood as a system of relations and differentiation, anthropologists such as Ruth Mandel (2008:20-21) remind how a language of process rather than one of fixity is better suited to understand its articulations. Bodily transmission and professional theatre making in Alevi contexts provide privileged areas to grasp such processual dynamics. Over the last few decades, an 'alevi' category has certainly been imagined in the frame of performing arts projects which were motivated by the intention of recovering, preserving, publicizing, asserting, experimenting or even transgressing specific bodily forms in Alevi traditional contexts. These artistic contexts are revelatory of the way fabrications and conceptualizations of Alevi contemporary cultural heritage have been configured through socio-cultural circumstances which are experienced and actualized in bodily dynamic terms.

This thesis pays attention to some of the situational and embodied dynamics at play in the making and transmitting of contemporary Alevi public cultures. To this end, current scholarship in Anthropology, Performance, and Dance provide

tools for analysing these performative and bodily dimensions, refining scholarly understanding of the processual and contingent character through which Alevi identities have been culturally produced and transmitted. In other words, the study of Alevi-themed performing arts projects helps debunk how, since the 1980s in Turkey and transnationally, Aleviness has been 'eventfully produced' also through staged events.

With this study, I wish to capture the resilience and dynamism of Alevi kinetic forms in embracing novel grounds for the existence and emergence of the transnational Alevi community. While focusing on the *semah*s, I wish to tackle Alevi identity building processes by approaching both Alevism and Aleviness as 'syncretic' cultural forms. In doing this, I find it useful to retrieve the notion of 'syncretism' out of the depiction that the turcologist Altan Gökalp gave of the religious system of the Kızılbaş, the ethnic group that is often assumed to comprise the most direct ancestors of the contemporary Alevis. As Gökalp understood it, the originality of the *kızılbaş* 'syncretism' resided in the juxtaposition of several socio-cultural layers that were amalgamated through an emphasis on dynamism. With reference to the work of the anthropologist Alfred Metraux, Gökalp had likened the *kızılbaş* ethno-religious system to the Haitian *voodoo* as forms revealing 'a real integration of different influences, integration which is much more than a clumsy adjustment of composite elements' (my translation from Gökalp 2011:174). In paying attention to the reinvention of the *semah*s as part of theatrical staged adaptations in a transnational landscape, I wish to question whether and how Alevi public cultures can still be understood in integrative terms, and what role professionalism in the performing arts plays in their articulation. Consequently, I wish to respond to the following key questions:

- How are the Alevi *semah*s being adapted as part of professional performing arts projects in Turkey and in Western Europe? To what extent do these adaptations transform 'traditional' forms and meanings associated to the *semah*s?
- Are the movement forms enacted within these staged adaptations still considered *semah*s? In other words, are the *semah*s still recognised as such when performed beyond the ritual contexts? Are they still *semah*s when performed by people who were not born in an Alevi family?
- How can the study of these staged adaptations help understand the modalities through which Aleviness is constructed as a composite, syncretic, public and transnational culture? How do they relate to the transmission of the *semah*s over younger generations of Alevis and non-Alevis alike?
- On a more methodological level, how can performance theory be applied in the use of Laban methods for movement notation and analysis within the study of ritual movement practices and their adaptations on the stage?

1.2 Different understandings of movement and the Alevis

In this thesis, the term 'movement' serves a conceptual lens to discuss the centrality of body motion in Alevi symbolism and social life, as emphasised by the crucial place of the *semah*s in Alevi rituals. The term wishes to catalyse three different yet interrelated understandings. Primarily, reference to movement serves to capture my attention to bodily and group kinetic forms in Alevi practices. These may be accompanied by music, such as in the *semah*s, or may not, as in modalities of standing and moving within Alevi rituals and beyond. On this primary level, I pay attention to the information that movements within Alevi contexts generate while

they transfer from religious to artistic framings (i.e. Dinçer 2014, 2004 and Özturkmen 2005). Second, the term addresses its more common use in Alevi studies, thus referring to the 'Alevi movement' as a social, ethno-politic and ethno-religious group articulated through a network of social actors sharing common communicative praxis and motivated by similar political opportunities (i.e. Massicard 2013; Sökefeld 2008; Şahin 2005; and Tee 2014). By interviewing these two understandings of *movement*, I thus pay attention to the way specific modalities of moving within Alevi performance practices shape shared Alevi identities. Finally, with the term *movement* I wish to hint at the pervasiveness of transnational mobility, migration, diaspora and displacement as crucial processes within which contemporary Alevi experiences and practices are experienced (i.e. Greve 2006; Mandel 2008; Massicard 2013; Sökefeld 2008; and Zirh 2012). In short, with this study I propose to impart new knowledge on the ways through which bodily and group movements within Alevi cultures shape belongings as a result of their professional stagings across national borders.

It is intriguing to notice how these different meanings conflate in the word 'movement' in a polysemy that subsists beyond English and Turkish languages, the Turkish term for 'movement' being *hareket*. Because these various meanings intersect in bodily movement, I intend to contribute to a better understanding of Alevi transnational cultural production by focusing on the capacity of Alevi bodies to move together in time. The three understandings defined above expound the reasons why, similarly to shifts in other disciplinary areas in dealing with *kinship* rather than *family*, *sound* rather *music*, or *performance* rather than *theatre*, I privilege to focus on *movement* rather than on the narrower, yet much more

culturally sensitive, category of *dance*.[2] This choice is however primarily motivated by attunement to emic perspectives during ethnographic fieldwork research. In fact, even though over the last decades, the Turkish government implemented an understanding of the *semah*s as folkloric dances which only residually exhibit the beliefs and practices of pre-Islamic Turkish shamanism in allegiance with Turkish national discourses on Aleviness (as I will explain further in Chapter 2), for the contemporary Alevis the *semah*s certainly retain a paramount devotional valence. The fact that in emic contexts the labelling the *semah* as dance is often perceived to be very inappropriate, if not provocative, testifies such situation.

I first realized the unsuitability of calling the *semah*s 'dances' in November 2010 when I participated for the first time to an Alevi sit-in demonstration and vigil in Sakarya Meydanı in downtown Ankara. On this occasion, several organisations assembled to protest some state-implemented policies, such as the unequal redistribution of founding for religious practices, the persistence of obligatory religion courses in state schools, or the continuous erecting of mosques in Alevi villages. Among the crowd, I had a chat with a woman in her 50s who had travelled by bus for more than ten hours from Malatya in the South-Eastern part of the country to join the protest. As she noticed that I was an outsider, after offering me candies, the woman asked me where I was coming from and why I had come. I said that I was an Italian student of anthropology, I admitted that this was my first immersion in a full-fledged Alevi event and that I was attending because I wanted to learn more about the *semah*s. In response, the woman told me that I would be most welcome to join the *semah* classes at the headquarters of the *Pir Sultan*

[2] For example, see Frishkopt (2013) for a discussion of the limits of the concept of 'music' in ethnomusicological studies of Islamic rituals.

Abdal Kültür Derneği, one of the organisers of the sit-in (an offer that I would go on to take up), but she was also firm in explaining that the *semah* is not a dance, but *ibadet* ('devotion').

Over the last few decades, rejecting to label the *semah* as 'dance' became a systematic response against the government's trivializing of Alevi religious practice. Theological and political reasons motivated this rejection as part of a struggle against assimilatory policies fought on an economic as well as a linguistic level. The aversion to the 'dance' label can be read alongside other appeals made by Alevi organisations to recognize the *cemevi*s as places of worship as much as the mosques, to recognize the *alevi* category on ID cards, or to abolish compulsory religious classes from the state schools' programmes. During my research, however, I also encountered Alevi people for whom understanding the *semah* as 'dance' was certainly possible, as well as other Alevi contexts (especially outside of Turkey) where these would be presented without problems as *dans* ('dance'), possibly accompanying the term with the adjective *kutsal* ('sacred'). For instance, as part of an education series aimed at younger Alevi generations, the London-based Qizilbaş Yayinevi released a bilingual booklet in Turkish and English (Aydoğmuş and Çoban 2014) into which the *semah*s are presented as *kutsal danslar* ('sacred dances'). The assumption that the Alevis reject the *semah* as 'dance' is thus a generalisation that the multiplicity of the cases and complicated transnational experiences do not corroborate.

Especially in Turkey, many Alevis would still reject the characterization of *semah* as dance as this is entangled in key processes of ethnic, religious and national identity formation and attribution that notably participate also to the constituency of Islam, despite a marginal viewpoint. Speaking of the *semah* in

terms of ‘dance’ may be considered a form of bad ‘cultural translation’ and we can understand why by taking into consideration the linguistic reference that is used in Turkish to denote the action of moving in the context of the *semah*. Since the verb that typically accompanies the word semah is *dönmek* (‘to turn’), it is more accurate to translate with ‘turning a *semah*’, rather than ‘dancing it’. During ethnographic fieldwork, rather than *dans* and *ibadet*, the term *hareket* seemed to be a much more negotiable category that could be used both in etic and emic discussion. For instance, among Alevi people I met, I never encountered a rejection to addressing the *semah*s as *hareket sistemi* (‘movement system’). At the same time, speaking in terms of movement allowed me to bring into consideration bodily motion in Alevi cultures and aesthetics in a broader sense. In this way, I started reflecting more holistically on dynamic embodied forms practiced in Alevi contexts, paying attention both to individual bodies’ movements as well as the articulation of group formations within the *semah*s. However, I could also consider bodily actions which would not be accompanied by music, and therefore would not be understood as dance by either Alevis or non-Alevis. For instance, my interest started to expand beyond the *semah*s and include embodied modalities of walking, sitting and praying in Alevi ritual events.

Besides, the term *dance* does not effectively capture the enmeshment of sonic and kinetic dimensions as conveyed by the term *semah*, which in fact refers both to the bodily movements as well as to the songs accompanying them. In addition to arguing that the distinction between prayer, music and dance is somehow a heuristic misrepresentation, this analysis wishes to push forward previous understandings of the practices by reinstating the centrality of bodily movement within scholarly literature. For this reason, my emphasis on movement

in analysing the Alevi *semah*s and their adaptation in staged contexts, is achieved at the cost of a relative neglect for the aural dimensions. For instance, the above mentioned classical understanding of the term *samāʿ* offered by Metin And as a modality of listening of which the movements constitute an outcome, is analogous to those given by other scholars of music and ritual within Islamic and Sufi practices who assign the kinetic element of the practice a derivative role in relation to the sonic one.[3] Moreover, whereas research has accorded much attention to Alevi music (Aksoy 2014; Clarke 1999; During 1995; Duygulu 1997; Greve 2006; Koerbin 2011a, 2011b; Markoff 1986a; 1986b; 1993; 2001; 2018; O'Connell 1991, Özdemir 2016, Pinkert 2016, Poyraz 2007; Sipos and Csáki 2009; 2016; Stokes 1996, among others), works that address specifically the choreutic dimension in Alevi cultures are limited (Arnaud-Demir 2002; 2003-2004; 2005; 2013; Özturkmen 2005; Dinçer 2004; 2014; Erol 2010; Keleş and Doğan 2016, Zarcone 2012b). Few studies in Turkish language focus on the *semah* as a topic on its own, sometimes addressing the movement elements as well as the musical ones (Erseven 1990, Bozkurt 1990, Aydogmus 2012). These publications were nonetheless often motivated by the intention to celebrate the practice rather than discussing it critically. Because of these gaps in existing scholarship, my choice of focusing on

[3] Classical study of ritual dance within Islam, such as Mole (1963), assign agency to sound more than to body movement in the ritual experience. Similarly, even though recognizing that in Islamic literature the *samā* is understood as a 'composite' into which dancing is associated with singing, hand-clapping and the playing of instruments, Shiloah reports utterances such as: 'the sounds of music awakens spirits deep in the slumber of ignorance and make them stand up and dance like the dead who will rise at the resurrection to the sound of the trumpet' (1995:142). Similarly, music, prayer and dance have often been understood to dissolve into a musical experience rather than into a kinetic one (i.e. see Lewisohn 1997:28). More recently, Frishkopt (2013) problematized the use of 'music' to analyse Islamic ritual, suggesting a framework centred around 'language performance'; in this study however, analysis of movement still has only a very marginal role. On the contrary, recent studies which focus on body movement within Islamic ritual include Bridgeman (2017), Cizmeci (2016) and Rodrigues (2017).

movement is deliberate and wishes to reassess dynamics of primacy between the musical and choreographic elements in the practice. This choice attests how, even though my understanding of the topic has been informed also by theories and research methods in Ethnomusicology, this study is placed primarily within Ethnochoreology, the Anthropology of Movement and Dance, the Anthropology of Performance and Theatre, as well as in Alevi studies.

1.3 Transnational circulation of Alevi movements

As an anthropologist, I understand movement as a grounding conceptual lens through which it is possible to investigate what is perceptible of human and animal bodily actions. My conceptualization considers how movements articulate individual and collective efforts of inhabiting and re-assessing human bodies' physical limits and possibilities. It comprehends movement as technique and technology, in other words as a field of primal and liberating capacities that are enabled and limited by the materiality of human bodies and body parts, and their interaction with other physical objects. My conceptualization of movement is also phenomenological since it is grounded in an understanding of the experiencing of space and time coordinates as embodied and situated phenomena. More specifically, I critically subscribe to an organisation of such coordinates through a three-dimensional mapping of directions (left/right, ahead/behind, above/below) and more or less countable temporal measures, that can be originated from the work of the dance theorist and artist Rudolf Laban (for instance, as discussed in Maletic 1987 and Moore 2009).

As an anthropologist who wishes to think in terms of movement, I subscribe to Brenda Farnell's theory of dynamic embodiment (2012) and I am inspired by

Kimerer LaMothe's attention to bodily engagement in the study of religious life (2008). Following Farnell, I wish to acknowledge how human body movement, and therefore the activities of persons, rather than just 'the body', should be positioned at the heart of theories of social action (2012:XII).[4] In other words, I position this research within social scientific studies which are informed by dance theories because of the recognition that bodies are by necessity always moving, and it is to the moving bodies that agency should be ascribed in cultural emergence and reproduction. As reminded by dancer and historian of religion Kimerer LaMothe (2008), this realization compels the researcher to attend to how her own moving body is physically engaged in shaping her own research. Accordingly, over fieldwork research, by bringing awareness to my participation through movement, I paid attention to the way the ability to move together in time within Alevi contexts shapes aesthetic sensibilities and shared convictions.

During fieldwork research in Alevi contexts, I came to better appreciate how the capacity to synchronize oneself to others while dynamically actualizing specific body forms and group configurations postulates moral values, more than simply reflecting them. Because of its capacity to demarcate values, I thus understand movement to be generative, rather than only reflective, of identities and belongings. In this sense, as mentioned already, it is noteworthy that the word 'movement' also refers to the getting together of people out of their partaking values, their mobilizing towards a common goal, as well as their establishing social roles and hierarchies. The circular formations enacted by the Alevis during the

[4] Theories of embodiment became very prominent in anthropology already in the 1990s, for instance as revealed by the impact of Thomas Csordas' important essay 'Embodiment as a Paradigm for Anthropology' (1990) in which the body is approached as subject, or existential ground, upon which culture and self emerge.

*semah*s are in fact a powerful lens to experientially understand how participation to synchronised movement forms can work as a powerful tool to reaffirm, restore or contest such shared values and hierarchies. The second definition of 'movement' in my assessment addresses the role of body movements as part of this fabrication of commonal identities, and it is in fact the one that is most commonly used in the social sciences - in relation to Alevism as 'Alevi movement'.

The third meaning of the term 'movement' which is relevant to my research is also widely current in social scientific vocabulary, for instance when we speak of 'the anthropology of movement' and refer to transnational mobility, displacement, diaspora and migration. In this third use, 'movement' prompts to acknowledge the transnational character of Aleviness as one of its most salient qualities. It forces to decentre its locale beyond the boundary of Turkey and to understand its re-production with reference to wider global landscapes. Pointing to the geographical and post-national dimension in the transmission of Alevi cultural production, in this study I approach changes in body movement patterns by considering the displacement of Alevis across national borders, as well as my own displacement in establishing a research field. In this way, dance scholarship serves here as an ideal critical lens to appreciate the transnational and migratory dimensions of Alevi experiences. Paul Scolieri has remarked how Dance studies are well posited to understand contemporary migrations:

> (…) dance and migration share common ground because the 'dance world' is a nomadic one, constituted by a mobile set of performers, choreographers, teachers, and audiences in search of economic prosperity, political asylum, religious freedom, and/or artistic liberty. (2008:vi)

More than a metaphor however, understanding the experiences of moving *semah* practitioners (*semahcı*s) in a continuum to those of performing artists who adapted

Alevi themes for the stage, helps seize the multi-centered and multi-directional nature of diversely embodied Alevi cultural forms. Ultimately, it is in this sense that I wish to push Sally Ann Ness's call to think '*foundationally* in terms of movement' (2008:260) in the frame of studies of Alevi migrations. Going '*all the way down*', *boiling things down* 'in the last analysis, to movement' (ibid.), I set myself to track the connectedness between ethnic, political, transnational, religious and artistic performances of Alevi identities. Accordingly, I understand 'thinking through movement' as a strategy to investigate the articulations of 'resistance, dominance, agency, mastery, knowledge, or mobilization itself' (Ness 2008:279) which transpire in the re-using of the *semah*s across their imaginative artistic adaptations and geographical displacements. As the Alevis are well aware, these articulations are indicative of a subtle and underlying conflict between ways of moving and assigning value and meaning to body movements.

As devotional practices, the *semah*s constitute an embodied modality of moving whose capacity to transcend cultural borders generate Aleviness as a specific transnational and transcendent intersubjectivity. Following Thomas Csordas, it may be questioned the extent to which the *semah*s constitute a successful *portable practice* and determine whether, as an emerging public religion, Alevism has been capable of 'travelling well' vis-à-vis the forceful dynamics of economic globalization.

> By *portable practice*, I mean rites that can be easily learned, require relatively little esoteric knowledge or paraphernalia, are not held as proprietary or necessarily linked to a specific cultural context, and can be performed without commitment to an elaborate ideological or institutional apparatus. (Csordas 2009:4)

The expression assisted Csordas to refer to many forms of yoga practices, whose success on the global market depended on the transnational adaptability through which they foster social commitments and transformations of everyday life without at the same time mobilizing substantial spiritual elaboration. Due to their esoteric quality, the *semah*s fit into this category much less and juxtaposing them to yoga techniques is inappropriate. Such marginality can be considered as indicative of the inability of Alevism to become an inclusive global religion. The lack of success of the *semah*s on the global market is possibly related to the fact that their learning did not transmute into a social activity which would be easily accessed by non-Alevi subjects.[5] The performance of the *semah*s is in fact still held as unavoidably linked to the specific ethno-cultural Alevi domain and indicates a firm commitment to the Alevi cause and pledge to its religious apparatus. In fact, the Alevi clergy generally hinders the practicing of the *semah*s when this is devoid of spiritual adherence to Alevi piety, thus considering it corrupt or at the very least denatured. It follows that rarely non-Alevi movement practitioners attempted their learning or their public performances.[6]

[5] If not for getting used to some of the asymmetrical rhythmical structures or frequent changes in tempo, I consider that most of the *semah*s do not require a high degree of kinetic skill to be performed. For this reason, I do not think that this lack of success depends on their difficulty to be learned on a technical level as

[6] In some of these rare occasions, *semah* forms were taught in higher education contexts outside of Turkey. Two such occasions could be mentioned here. In February 2016, dr. Selçuk Göldere, director of Dance at Hacettepe University, who had worked in the past as choreographer for *Kardeşlik Töreni - Samah* (the theatre piece which will be analysed in Chapter 5), introduced elements of Alevi *semah* forms to a group of non-Alevis during a practical workshop on Anatolian and Middle Eastern Dance, Drama and Music which I organised at the Drama department in Exeter in collaboration with Veronica Buffon from the Institut of Arab and Islamic Studies. Göldere co-directed the workshop with Dr. Hannah McClure, Teaching Fellow in Dance at the University of Surrey, who taught elements of Mevlevi sema practices. In April 2019, Ömer Ongun, a member of Boğazici Performing Arts Ensemble (BGST) and of the music band Kardeş Türküler, led a workshop on *semah* rituals from the regions of Tokat, Dersim and Erzincan, at the University of Ottawa.

The transpositions of the *semah*s to the stage which are investigated in this thesis however, reveal other dynamics of circulation which are symptomatic of the way Alevi cultures have gone through 'unexpected combinations, new valences, and alternative cultural meanings and experiences' (Noland 2008:X) over the last decades. To limit the understanding of these dynamics as processes of appropriation from their 'rightful' religious communities of origin to 'deceitful' communities of practice on the stage is nonetheless as limiting as it would be not to acknowledge their standing as religious phenomena within a global market economy. Claiming that these dynamics are alien to the construction of contemporary Alevi experiences within and beyond a spiritual intersubjectivity would be also misleading. Accordingly, to track processes of cultural transmission, translation and transformation of such spiritually-charged movement forms, I endorse dance anthropologist Jane Desmond's shift of focus from theoretical frameworks that construct them in terms of ownership and appropriation to ones that emphasise 'circulation and the multi-sided creation and recreation of *value*' (2017: 30). Nonetheless, while looking at these stage transpositions, rather than as denaturalized or decontextualized phenomena, following Desmond, I remain attentive to the politics of community making and consumption which operate within and beyond Alevi networks and institutions.

My appeal to the notion of *circulation* is nonetheless also strongly inspired by other conceptualizations which have been developed outside of the realm of Dance Studies, and possibly aims at transposing these conceptualizations back into dance and movement theorization. For instance, I borrow from the anthropologist and historian of Arab societies and diasporas Engseng Ho who promoted an understanding of circulation as 'a substantive sociological alternative

to notions of structure, which connote fixity and perdurance of relations through time' (2017:928). Accordingly, more than understanding the *semah*s on the lines of Kaeppler's notion of 'structured movement system' (1978), I try and think of them in terms of 'movement system circulations'. All but accidental or fortuitous, such circulations are anchored in predictable regulations in time (through their repetition, which creates stability, habit, expectations and reality) and in space. To navigate their spatial flows, as Ho, I will adopt an intermediate and trans-regional scale as I consider that this gradation prevents me from getting lost in the abstraction of the global, nor trapped in local or national viewpoints. Accordingly, my research moves on a 'thick' transnational axis, diagonally contained within urban sites spreading across the south-east and north-west of Europe, between England and Turkey. Understanding the circulations of the *semah*s across rituals and professional stage projects within some interconnected and adjacent geographical locales on this axis, I propose a partial vision which does not rely on countries and societies as stable givens, but rather on the reliability and resilience of people (being them Alevis, performers, or scholars) moving between them.[7]

1.4 The *semah*s: performance, professionalisation and adaptation

On the 3rd of October 2013, I presented for the first time a paper in an international conference. This happened at the University of Bingöl, a city in the Eastern part of Turkey, during the symposium *Geçmişten Günümüze Alevilik* (lit.

[7] Examples of studies which in meaninful ways operated over similar trans-regional and multi-sited scale are magistrally offered within Alevi studies by Besim Can Zirh (2012) and within Ethnomusicology by Eliot Bates (2014). Zirh tracked Alevi funerary routes between England, Germany, Norway and Turkey, whereas Bates discussed the distributed musical production of Grup Yorum's album *Yıldızlar Kuşandık* (2006) between Istanbul and Germany despite the often limited mobility of some the band members due to their socialist activism and performance in Kurdish language.

'Aleviness from Past to Present').[8] Organised by scholars working on Alevi Studies together with Alevi religious priests, the symposium promised to be a great opportunity to collect feedback and to weigh the limits of my research in a context into which both scholarly and religious perspectives converged for the making of knowledge about Aleviness.[9] However, after the initial thrill of learning that my abstract proposal had been accepted, my participation revealed to be a greater challenge than I expected. My inaptness to perform the role of the outsider ethnographer revealed the underlying conflict between different appraisals and usages of the *semah*s which was at the hearth of the challenge. The ethnographic vignette which I insert below tries to convey that initial test, as well as to hint at the self-reflective attitude that I nurtured throughout my moving and performing throughout the research process.

October 2013, University of Bingöl

> On the morning of my presentation the conference organisers unexpectedly ask me to present my paper in Turkish translation rather than in its English original as they say that this would feel more *samimi* ('sincere') to the audience. I accept after getting back to my room and checking that I understand and agree with the translation.[10] Then, in a very crowded

[8] The University of Bingöl was founded just few years ahead of the symposium as part of a development plan in Higher Education which was inaugurated in 2007 by the AKP government. The city, where the president Erdoğan has inaugurated also an airport in 2013, is renowned for being a conservative Sunni city amid an area populated mostly by Kurdish and Alevi minorities.

[9] Few months ahead I had completed my Research Master's in Turkish Studies at Universiteit Leiden in the Netherlands. That dissertation comprised a first ethnographic discussion of the piece *Kardeşlik Töreni – Samah* by the semi-amateur group Ankara Deneme Sahnesi, which is discussed in Chapter 5.

[10] During the three crowded days of the symposium, amidst more than a hundred papers presented in Turkish language, only mine and another one were planned to be delivered in English. Together with a paper in Arabic and one in Kurmanji, these papers would in fact be testifying the 'international' character of the event. Each panel was scheduled to last one hour and include five papers, with presentations shrinking to 12 minutes without any time for questions and debates. Even though it dealt with the semah, my paper was not inserted in the panels on dance and music in Alevi cultures but rather

> conference room, just while the panel chair is introducing my paper, one of the *dede*s in the organising committee, a man in his 50s with a long white beard, stands up and contests its title ('*The Alevi Semah as a Theatre Performance*'), asking the chair not to let me speak in this occasion. If before arriving I had been anxious that I would be expected to perform the role of the 'outsider expert' among a crowded group of Alevi scholars and priests, suddenly I now feel that I am being misrepresented and publicly disregarded as a provoking intruder. Even though taking distance from the title of my paper, the chair hesitantly suggests that I should have a chance to speak and that my discussion may be valid if placed within the 'sociology of art' rather than 'religion'. After his consent for me to read the paper, as I try to prove my ability in presenting in Turkish, I never dare to look at the audience, afraid that I may be booed at the first incorrect word. Once I finished, noone claps hands, even though conventional applauses followed the other presentations. On the contrary, the chair promptly asks the *dede* who stood up earlier for his reaction to my paper. The *dede* thus comments that, all in all, I also did my work and that, even though he would not agree with my views, it was alright for me to speak. As they launch the break, while I step down from the stage and walk through the audience, nobody approaches me to start a conversation. I even hear someone say: 'I certainly would not thank you!', but I tell myself that maybe I understood that wrong. Finally, two psychologists from Istanbul discretely come close and tell me that what I did was very courageous and that the episode led them to realize the extent to which they will need to rework the paper they are presenting tomorrow, as they are proposing a psychanalytic understanding of the *cem* ritual. Later, another outsider researcher like me, a Japanese anthropologist, tells that I should have taken better care of the people's emotions, and that, if I wanted to really understand *Alevilik*, I should have focused on the village rituals rather than their theatre adaptations in Ankara.

The vignette illustrates how much discussing 'the Alevi *semah* as a theatre performance' can be a problematic task. Within it, the divergence between perspectives embedded in actors performing insiders and outsiders' roles, scholars and devotes, artists and priests, theatre-makers and ritual-officers, dwellers in the cities and in the villages, are made evident. The fact that a *dede* intervened before I could even start speaking felt as a warning about the risks implicit in considering topics related to theatre, drama and performance as a worthy endeavour of scholarly research within Alevi studies. The title of my paper was felt to be either

in a generic but high-flagged panel which followed on the opening keynotes and included three of the international papers.

naïf or provocative, and the *dede*'s brisk reprimand created a climate of scepticism on my focusing on the *semah* in the context of theatre, rather than religion.

The scepticism of the *dede* towards my discussion of the *semah* within a theatre context could have been anticipated. Religion studies scholar Catherine Bell has pointed out that, even though shedding light on 'secular and new forms of ritual or ritual-like activity', performance theory has often 'failed to account for the way in which most cultures see important distinctions between ritual and other types of activities' (1997:76). Thinking back on the episode in Bingöl, I realise that, whilst in my presentation I was not aiming at collapsing the distinction between Alevi rituals and Alevi-related theatrical events, I was nonetheless perceiving these different social phenomena as part of a continuum. This is an objective that I still pursue in this thesis, even though with some embodied awareness of the ways Alevi devotes and priests may possibly contest this heuristic choice. More than movement, an approach that highlights performance both as object as well as method of research, relies on the assumption that disciplinary frameworks in the Anthropology of Dance and Theatre, and more broadly in the Anthropology of Movement and Performance, may provide a fresh look at literature in Alevi Studies, thus exploring the fertile area of intersection between such diverse academic domains. This approach is motivated by several reasons and narrowed by several research foci which I should unpack here.

More generally, I consider that performance theory helps assess displays of those 'recognized and culturally coded patterns of behavior' (Carlson 1996: 4-5) which organise Alevi social life, and more specifically to evaluate the elements of theatricality within Alevi rituals. Attention to embodied practice and its display within the rituals can generate analysis that makes visible how social processes shape

Alevi identities. In this sense, I agree with Frederick Corey that 'the study of performance provides a heuristic devise for social constructionism' (1996:148) because it helps understand how identities are produced through activities which involve 'negotiation of meaning, arbitration of power, and definition of self' (ibid.). Most importantly, however, I consider that a framework based on performance is unescapable when we want to enlighten how professionalised staged adaptations of Alevi ritual materials have been entangled within larger socio-cultural developments, especially intensified after the events of Sivas in 1993. In considering the complex interrelation of Alevi cultures with artistic practice (possibly a task that fits well into the articulation of a British performance paradigm, as delineated by Roms 2010), I wish to highlight the centrality of Alevi moving and performing bodies as crucial locales and sources for experiential socio-scientific enquiries of Aleviness. In this sense, I argue that exploring the pivotal role of the performing arts in the contemporary 'explosion' of Alevi identities provides paths for reassessing Aleviness in light of historical processes which are always situated, performed, and embodied.[11]

The artistic projects that I investigate in this thesis are developed around choreographies and dramaturgies which are strongly inspired by Alevi ritual

[11] Both in the broader sense of analysing the display of culturally coded human behaviour, as well as in the narrower sense of analysing artistic practices, methodologies based in performance have been successfully applied in the study of the Muslim world and of the Middle East. For instance, *Performing Islam* is an interdisciplinary journal which focuses on socio-cultural as well as the historical and political contexts of artistic practices in the Muslim world. Weines (2016) collects studies that investigate the performative quality of texts within Islam. In the context of Ottoman history, Öztürkmen and Vitz (2014) is an important publication which addresses the study of artistic practices as well as broader social performances, whereas Farouqui and Öztürkmen (2014) focuses more on historical festivals, entertainments and ceremonies. Kaya Şahin (2018) offers an interesting example of an application of a methodology based on performance for the study on a twenty-day celebration on the occasion of the circumcision of three Ottoman princes in 1530.

themes. In general terms, such projects can be understood to be part of a shifting of Alevi cultural production from ritual towards theatrical domains. To think about this shift, I find useful to refer to Guy Debord's notion of spectacle. Meant as 'a social relationship between people that is mediated by images' (Debord 1995:10), a notion of spectacle is capable of providing a unitary representation of society *despite*, and at the same time *because*, of its isolation from 'life'. As such, Alevi-themed performing arts projects crystallize a novel ontological distance between performers and spectators in the transmission of bodily Alevi heritage which, if not completely new, certainly departs from the one existing in the rituals. Disclosing a perpetual *separation* which is typical of social relations in contemporary forms of capitalist production and consumption, this distance satisfies the demands for discriminative aesthetic judgments. It is solely through such separation, emerged after processes of knowledge construction and performative disciplining, that an embodied spiritual practice like the *semah* started to be conceived in the realm of the creative industries as a theatrical dance. Accordingly, my approach wishes to remain attentive to the way the struggles for the emancipation of the Alevis within national and transnational imaginaries has been often pursued within this spectacular potential.

The term I use to refer to this shift is 'adaptation', a concept which is not as current in Dance as it is in Theatre Studies.[12] Turning to literature on the adaptation of folk dances for the stage, this shift can be understood as a partial re-adjustment from a 'primary' to a 'secondary existence' (Hoerberger 1968), from a 'participatory' to a 'presentational' character (Nahachewski 1995), or from 'survival' to 'revival'

[12] A conference on adaptation and dance was hosted in 2016 at the Centre for Adaptations at De Montfort University with the intention of moving away from the dominant focus on film and television in Adaptation Studies.

forms (Shay 1999b). Nevertheless, both for the complexity of their dramaturgies, but also, as I have already discussed, because the *semah*s do not easily fit in the 'dance' category and their acquired folkloric character remains minor when compared to their ritual significance, as staged adaptations, these artistic projects exceed such categories. In the context of theatre studies, Kara Reilly remarked how, like dramaturgy, adaptation is a slippery term that 'eludes definition because it is so context specific' (p. xxi), and can thus only be explored 'through specific, material concrete examples that help us to build both archive and repertoire' (2018:xxii). With the term, I wish to shed light on a series of morphological and semantic adjustments of the *semah*s for the stage to discern which elements from the wider *semah* repertoire were selected to be included in dramatic 'archives' and displayed on national and international platforms, and which elements, on the contrary, remained excluded from them. Looking at the selections and changes in the structures and qualities of the movements of the *semah*s performed on the stage, I try to understand the role that these adaptations played in larger historical developments, such as instances of urbanization, migration, folklorisation and heritagization. In other words, I see these adaptations as responses to, and constituents of, the transformations of previous economic and linguistic environments surrounding Aleviness.

As remarked by theatre theorist Graham Ley (2015), adaptation is not only constitutive of any theatre form, but cultural formations themselves are instituted on the premises of human species adaptive capacities. In this sense, Arzu Öztürkmen's article on the re-contextualization of the *semah*s as folklore (2005) and Fahriye Dinçer's wide-ranging study on the reformulations of the *semah*s in Turkish Republican history (2004) offer solid frameworks to re-assess the

adjustments to which the Alevis have been pushed within the Turkish national imagination. Understanding such public forms as re-invented traditions, Dinçer considered how, especially since the 1980s, the *semah*s started catalysing Alevi cohesion in urban ritual contexts, becoming a powerful symbol of external visibility. Dinçer observed how the *semah*s were re-adjusted through a set of 'rules' resulting in a tendency towards uniformity, articulated in allegiance or resistance of Aleviness to Turkish national culture. However, over the last few decades, the changes of *semah* forms, meanings and contexts further reconfigured even their supposedly 'stable' theatrical forms inviting to reconsider the assumption that Alevi modernity coincided with standardization.

When we think of the *semah*s' adaptations for the stage, 'individualized' and 'professionalised' are other descriptors that might encapsulate the dynamic iteration and creativity of the Alevis' self-reinvention. As I will explore in depth in Chapter 3, in this thesis I use the term *professionalisation* to refer to exchanges of expertise in Alevi ritual office-holding and the performing arts sector. These dynamics indicate shifts in the organisation of the ritual performances, which over the last decades, more and more resulted out of the coordinated endeavour of skilled ritual officers who were themselves trained in theatre, music and dance. It however also relates to the manifold ways through which Alevi subjects became themselves publicly recognised as accomplished performing artists. Such professionalisation contributed enormously to formal changes in ritual performances, at times reproducing, other times challenging, traditional religious hierarchies and gender norms. At the same time, it also provided the capacity to contest the 'domestication' of Aleviness in the public sphere, either in terms of delegitimising State-driven processes of heritage-making, either in terms of

resisting the marketing demands of the entertainment industry. In this regard, Bahar Aykan (2012) discussed the alarming falsifications that tempered the enlisting of the Alevi-Bektaşi *semah*s as UNESCO intangible heritage in a process launched by the ruling party (AKP, *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, lit. 'Justice and Development Party) in 2010. As I share many of the concerns voiced by Aykan's informants, and possibly of the *dede* within the vignette above, it is important to stress that by focusing on their dramatic adaptations I do not wish to negate or diminish the cogency of the *semah*s as spiritual practices. On the contrary, I wish to highlight how the theatre often offered a scaffold for their re-discovery also as spiritual phenomena. This rediscovery, fought on a bodily level, challenged a political context in which public and administrative framing of Aleviness as religion have been normally hindered, if not ideologically domesticated. Consequently, by picturing the freshness and nonconformity of Aleviness as performative and embodied phenomena, I wish to expand its existing sociological conceptualizations as an emerging syncretic public religion, Islamic heterodoxy, or peculiar cultural marker.

An analysis of professional staged adaptations of Aleviness enables a thoughtful reflection on how the 'Alevi' category is articulated in processual terms rather than as a stable given. My approach of Aleviness through movement and performance corroborates socio-scientific arguments which problematize and dismiss a language of fixity when discussing notions of culture, identity, ethnicity or authenticity. In this, I subscribe to Jean and John Comaroff's proposition that ethnicity should be understood in plural terms as one of the modalities that arrange processes of historically informed differentiation.

> Ethnicity, far from being an unitary 'thing' describes both a set of relations and a mode of consciousness; moreover, its meaning and practical salience varies for different social groupings according to their position in the social order. But, as a form of consciousness, it is one among many (…) each of which is produced as particular historical structures impinge themselves on human experiences and condition social action. (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992:54)

In contrast to much literature in Alevi Studies which often depended on visions of ethnicity as static, an emphasis on professional staged adaptations of Aleviness invites to reassess Alevi identity markings in relational and situational terms. Likewise, I concur with Ruth Mandel's that a language that privileges process (i.e. 'ethnicization', 'de-ethnicization') rather than fixity, should be privileged when discussing traditional belongings (2008:21). Accordingly, I see the professional staged adaptations of Aleviness as magnifiers that accentuate how the 'alevi' category is not an undisputed cultural 'fact', nor should be understood as a tenet into an absolute social ontology. Thinking in terms of 'ethnicization' rather than in terms of 'ethnicity' is an important step towards a more accurate depiction of such complexities. Attention to professionalised endeavours in staging Aleviness enables a focus on processes of Alevi-making, if not of 'alevitising' as well as 'de-alevitisating', thus shedding light on the historical and embodied qualities that characterize these ethnicizing dynamics. In other words, performance scholarship provides a fresh heuristic pathway to acknowledge how the 'alevi' category gets fabricated and configured also through contingent constellations of circumstances. Indeed, expert staged adaptations invite to acknowledge the character of 'eventful production' of Aleviness, specifying the modalities through which these ethnicizing processes materialize.

The study of performing arts professionalism in Alevi contexts that I pursue relies on an appreciation of dance as an imaginative and creative endeavour which

is resourceful for the rehearsal and fabrication of embodied social alternatives. Dance scholars Gebriele Klein and Sandra Noeth postulate how dance can expound novel 'ways of wordmaking':

> (…) dance reveals its effectivity not in the representation of existing structures and systems, but unfolds its potentiality precisely in the offering of alternatives, of utopias, developed with the help of the body and through the organization of movement. (Klein and Noeth 2011:9)

Similarly, I understand the use and training of the human body and the pondered composition of movement in relation to other bodies and space, as the specific way through which dance realizes the creation of worlds in contrast to other arts and sciences. Such training and organisation constitutes the vital condition through which dance professionalism endeavours to remove uncertainties and establish knowledge. For Klein and Noeth, it is the commitment to trigger and manipulate ephemerality and elusiveness that comprises the reason why dance may be appreciated as a field of knowledge-making par excellence:

> Critical involvement with the motif of the 'ephimeral' and of elusiveness is of central importance for dance research when inquiring into the 'how' of worldmaking. But it is also of epistemological urgency, considering that dance, as a medium of the body and presence, can be seen as a field of knowledge par excellence for research into how certainty about the world is created between the poles of perception, imagination, action and cognition. (Klein and Noeth 2011:10)

This study follows this proposition, possibly suggesting that contemporary understandings of the *semah*s as 'knowledge' (such as in opposition to 'elusiveness') depend on the fact that dance professionals were capable to seize them within a field of 'knowledge-making' over the last decades. Accordingly, the

study of skilled adaptations of the *semah*s on the stage can shed light on the bodily and societal strategies through which contemporary Alevi cultures were made concrete and legitimate. Furthermore, because these artistic live forms hint at emerging Alevi configurations and imaginative re-workings, their study provides a tentative forecast to conjecture possible Alevi future developments. My attention to these dynamic professional and staged forms aims at re-positioning public expressions of Aleviness, and henceforth its presentation and re-codification both in Turkey and transnationally. The context of theatrical productions and the transposing of Alevi ritual practices on the stage is thus a fertile ground to acknowledge what Mandel called 'the ability of the Alevis to continually find ways to re-express themselves', and a catalyser through which strong ideological ambitions have been conveyed and articulated.

Attention to theatrical and choreographic adaptations of the *semah*s enables us to grasp how, beyond religious and political arenas, an Alevi subjectivity emerged across more artistic fields. More than the place of Aleviness in contemporary Turkish and international live art scenes, attention to performing art making in Alevi contexts exposes the emergence of the Alevi subject, not only as performing art maker, but also as spectator and audience member. Across Turkish and international climates within which the Alevi subject has often been misrecognized, othered, or even seen as a security threat, performance art making often responded to the necessity to reinstate a stance against repression. In this sense, inspired by Randy Martin's ethnography of theatre, state and socialism in Nicaragua and Cuba (1994) as well as by some of his theoretical reflections on dance as instances of socialism (2004), I suggest that more than only shaping individual consumption decisions within a consumerist market rationality, by

becoming spectator as well as performer, the Alevi subject found a frame within which it was possible to conflate an urge to gather for social survival. Assembling together in formal performing events did not inaugurate isolated selves, but provided the occasion for Alevis to look at themselves, to produce some self-understandings and concepts of identity which would fit within an adaptive, cohesive, mobile and mobilised Alevi society.

1.5 Methodology and ethics: between ethnography and Kinetography

In this study, several disciplines have been blended to approach the complex topic of contemporary staged adaptations of the Alevi *semah*s. These include Performance and Theatre Studies, Dance Studies and Movement Analysis, the Anthropology of Religions, Turkish Studies, Alevi Studies, and studies in Diaspora and Transnationalism. My academic background rests on a degree in Cultural Anthropology at the University of Bologna, a program during which, thanks to a six-months Erasmus scholarship, I studied also at the Sociology department of Marmara University in Istanbul. To complete this degree, in 2007, I wrote a dissertation in the Ethno-Anthropology of Religions about contemporary Mevlevi cultural forms. In that dissertation, I approached the political management of religion in contemporary Turkish history, representations of the Mevlevi rituals in orientalist scholarship and topics in the Anthropology of Tourism.[13] This initial investigation drew my interest towards the Alevis and the *semah*s, topics which were still unheard to me at that time. For the common origin of their names, the

[13] The Mevlevis are possibly the best known and most contemplated religious orders (*tarikat*) in contemporary Turkey. Forced into clandestinity after the enforcement of laicism through Kemalist policies of the 1920s, with the liberal climate of the 50s the order acquired international visibility by embracing a folklorisation of their rituals and promoting their performance as touristic attractions.

Alevi *semah* is often confused with the Mevlevi *sema*.[14] Even though both have been inscribed in the UNESCO intangible cultural heritage list, the two religious groups and their practices enjoy very different levels of visibility and financial support. The Mevlevi *sema* gained this status slightly earlier, in 2005, anticipating and opening the way for the recognition of the Alevi *semah* five years later. Aykan remarked however that, whereas the Mevlevi *sema* was successfully recognized, the AKP government's assimilatory policies towards Alevi-Bektaşism favoured a 'misrecognition (…) that aims at redefining it as a subdivision of Sunni Islam other than a distinct Islamic sect' (2012:73). Whether addressing the role of tourist gaze made sense in an analysis of Mevlevi cultural forms, other socio-political factors were needed to understand the peripheral position of Alevi movement adaptations.

My initial engagement with the study of the Alevi *semah*s and their adaptation for the stage dates to a visit to the archives of the Odin Teatret and of the International School of Theatre Anthropology (ISTA) in Holstebro, Denmark in 2008. There, I found a flier of the theatre performance *Kardeşlik Töreni - Samah* (KTS) by the Ankara-based theatre group Ankara Deneme Sahnesi. Subsequently, after relocating to Ankara in February 2009, for five months I participated to the rehearsals of this piece and conducted fieldwork research in several religious and secular contexts related to the Alevi *semah* in Turkey. To refine my knowledge of Turkish language and pursue a more systematic investigation, I then enrolled in a Research Master's in Area Studies, with a specialization in Turkish, at Leiden University. Once again, while I was enrolled in this program, thanks to an Erasmus

[14] Over the last decades, two words became differentiated by a final [-h], a demarcation that I apply in my writing. More than the similarity in their name, both practices imply the action of turning in circles, even though, in general terms, the Mevlevis emphasize more the whirling around the practitioner's body vertical axis, whereas the Alevis whirl more as a group around a common centre.

Scholarship, I relocated for one academic year to Turkey, this time studying at the Social Anthropology department of METU, Ankara.[15] The Master's thesis that resulted out of this research period constitutes a preliminary step towards the writing of this thesis, especially for the material which I discuss in Chapter 5. Overall, I have been spending intensive research periods in Turkey for a total timespan of about five years between 2006 and 2018, contributing to my proficiency in Turkish language.

More than conducting research in Turkey however, since 2013 I have been conducting fieldwork in the context of the Alevi diaspora outside of Turkey, for instance between September 2015 and June 2016 when I participated in the *cem* rituals, and took classes in turning the *semah*s and playing the *bağlama* within the *cemevi* in Dalston, London. In France, Belgium and England, I also sporadically participated to concerts and events into which Aleviness was performed on the stage, accumulating experiences than conflate in this research. In Chapter 3, I will give a further overview on the experience gained as part of fieldwork in the ritual contexts, and in Chapter 4 on that gained as part of fieldwork in professional performing arts contexts related to Aleviness. Within each chapter in Part 2 I will then give further details on the specificities and timespans of fieldwork research conducted in the contexts of the performance pieces analysed. Because of the interdisciplinary nature of this project, more than thoroughly utilising methodologies and conversing with scholarly works in Anthropology, Performance, Theatre, Dance and Alevi studies, to address the specific case-studies within each chapter in Part 2, I will also resort to more apposite concepts and theoretical frameworks

[15] Founded in 1956, the Middle Eastern Technical University (METU, or Orta Doğu Teknik Üniversity, ODTÜ) is one of the most prestigious public universities in Turkey and specialised in the natural and social sciences.

within the broader Social Sciences as required by each specific research context. For instance, to better translate for an English-reading audience the peculiar researching methods which conflated in the piece *Kardeşlik Töreni-Samah*, in Chapter 5 I will suggest a comparison of local performance research methods found in Turkey with artistic and scholarly approaches that became known as Performance Ethnography elsewhere. Furthermore, to refine the analysis of the performance pieces discussed in Chapter 6 and in Chapter 7, I will make use of notions emerged within studies of transnationalism, diaspora and postcolonial theorizing.

This research is sustained by my competence in the Kinetography Laban, a movement notation system that I studied at the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique et Danse de Paris (CNSMDP) in France between 2013 and 2015. As I will discuss further in Chapter 4, more than the Kinetography Laban, I partially trained in other Laban-derived movement analysis methods, such as Laban Movement Analysis and Laban Motif Description. Being able to use notation strategies led me to document some of the most recurring movement forms within the *semah*s that I experienced, but also to ask questions about previous notational approaches to the *semah*s. Nonetheless, such competences in movement notation led me also to investigate previous successful attempts at kinetic analysis of the *semah*s and to reflect self-critically on the way these methods operated within my own performance as an ethnographer during fieldwork, a concern that remained constant through the research.[16] Although movement notation informed my analysis of all the performance pieces discussed in the second part of the thesis,

[16] Schieffelin (2005) offers succinct discussion of broader problems in ethnographic transcription of performances.

the recourse to notation may not seem to be consistent throughout the three case studies. This inconsistence partially depends on the qualities and limits of the Kinetography Laban as a tool for documentation. For instance, the system could not be meaningfully applied in the analysis of the piece contained within the performance event discussed in Chapter 6 because of my inability to participate in rehearsals or meeting in person its choreographer and dancers. As for the piece discussed in Chapter 7, the more improvised quality of the composition led me to opt for using Laban Motif Description methods, even though this material was finally not included in the chapter.

I expanded my competence in the field of Middle Eastern Music Studies by participating to a module led by my co-supervisor, John Morgan O'Connell, at the School of Music in Cardiff in Spring 2015. I then gained further sophistication in the field of Alevi Studies, Musicology and Ethnochoreology of Turkey and the Ottoman Empire, and ethnographic research on religious minorities in Turkey and in its neighbouring regions, thanks to a PhD research fellowship at the Max Weber Stiftung, Orient Institut Istanbul, for six months between 2017 and 2018.[17] During this time, I could meet several key informants who worked in the past for some of the pieces that I discuss in the thesis, and I became better accustomed to the professional dance scene in Istanbul, joining several dance and movement classes and paying attention to Istanbul's spectatorships and innovation in the performing

[17] Here, several leading scholars in the field of Alevi music and ritual, such as Martin Greve, Robert Langer, and Ulaş Özdemir offered specialized feedback on some elements of my work. In December 2018, I was also invited to give a public lecture within a lecture series that the Institut organised on the themes of the 'Aesthetic Dimensions of Alevi Cultural Heritage'. This was a precious opportunity to gather responses on my research from scholars working in other disciplinary fields within Alevi studies (such as Music, Architecture, Literary and Manuscript Studies), as well as from Alevi audiences or people working in Alevi associations. The lecture was attended also by the choreographer and scholar Bedirhan Dehmen, whose artistic work I approach in Chapter 7, who provided important feedback in this occasion.

arts.[18] This was important as, more than Ankara, London, Berlin, Cologne, Brussels or Paris, Istanbul constitutes certainly the most nodal juncture where much of the artistic production which I analyse has been created or firstly showcased. Finally, in June 2018, thanks to a generous invitation by Markus Dressler and Robert Langer to present a paper about my research within the 2nd PhD Workshop in Alevi Studies organised by the Alevi Educational Organisation in Ravensburg, Germany, I obtained precious specialised feedback from several participants in that context.

More than interdisciplinary, this study is motivated by an understanding of research as a self-reflective, intersubjective, intersectional endeavour of cultural translation. In this section, I wish to address some important aspects that I pursued in terms of 'performance ethnography' such as the acknowledging of the primacy of the ethical within anthropology or the exposing of the performative processes through which the research was constructed through fieldwork and writing. Rather than the more *procedural* and legal aspects of ethics, which have been met through compliance with required standards by the University of Exeter and implementation of approved actions for gathering consent among 'participants', data collection and storage, I find it important to address here some of the more *processual* ethical aspects of the research experience and its writing.[19] A discussion of

[18] For instance, I systematically explored the work of the dance group Mesopotamya Dans, a contemporary dance group engaging with issues of Kurdish epics, identity and women struggle, as well as Alevi themes, by watching some of their pieces. One of these, *4 Kapı 40 Makam*, is extremely relevant for my PhD, and would deserve a chapter on its own in the thesis, a task that I have not be able to accomplish due to time restrictions. I did however meet the choreographer Yeşim Coşkun, recorded a long interview with her, and I also produced a brief preliminary movement score of a choreographic sentence in the piece. This material certainly deserves further documentation and examination, and may inspire a potential post-doctoral project or similar.

[19] My approach to participants has been sensible to the way 'alevi' constitutes a sensible category which tends to refer to diverse meanings throughout different national

intersubjectivity within this performance ethnography framework should clarify in what sense, in reconstructing evidence of the research, I nurture a sense of vulnerability as a writer who is aware of the unlikeliness of relying on face-to-face encounters with the readers while reassuring them of the ethical soundness of the study.

In acknowledging the primacy of the ethical, I hope to commit to a 'more woman-hearted' and militant anthropology (Shepers-Hughes 1995) as well as to a view of performance ethnography as struggle and moral act (Conquergood 1985). As an anthropologist, I see my role as the one of a public intellectual who is motivated by an engaged, if not activist, task, and who aims to produce representations which are 'grounded in and co-constructed in the politically and personally problematic worlds of everyday life' (Denzin 2003:55). My enquiry has been stirred from a repugnance of the ordinary unfairness into which the Alevis were made invisible, misunderstood, or insulted over the time when I have been living in Turkey. Many times, I was appalled when in the middle of a conversation in Turkish, vilifying prejudices about the 'Alevis' would transpire seemingly in all

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legal contexts. Such difficulties are related to the fact that whether some European countries, as Germany, Austria and more recently the UK, in different forms sustain the recognition of Alevism as an autonomous belief system, the Turkish government does not recognize it as a social or religious marker and only recently started to acknowledge publicly the existence of the Alevis. Normally these are assimilated into the more general 'Muslim' category, a label that underlines the Sunni mainstream understanding of the term. Consequently, it is not possible for the Alevis to identify as such on ID cards. Official statistics by the Turkish government of the number of the Alevi population do not exist whereas the European Commission estimates it to be between 12 to 20 million. These issues and others will be further approached in Chapter 2. As for general ethical guidelines I refered to the Principles of Professional Responsibility, published online by the American Anthropological Association in November 2012 (http://ethics.aaanet.org/category/statement/), the Position Statement on Ethical Considerations approved by the Board of the Society for Ethnomusicology in 1998 (http://www.ethnomusicology.org/?page=EthicsStatement) and more discussion on the use of visual material as it is presented in the article 'State of the Ethics in Visual Anthropology' by Sarah Perri and Jonathan Marion (http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1548-7458.2010.01070.x/abstract).

the ease of the speaker. Often and casually, the term would be a synonym of smelly, dirty, debauched, corrupt, ignorant and so forth. Other times and in other contexts though, the term was used to indicate virtuous people, carrying the qualities of gender-equality, democracy and a refined aesthetic sensibility. The category could also be reclaimed with arrogance, and the construction of a linear history of 'victimhood' would become pretence for subtler forms of aggression.[20] In such climate of very engrained, even legalised, prejudice and celebration, I felt compelled to question what was the role of body movement and performance in the construction of such cultural facts, and why the 'alevi' category and practices were typically permeated by these ambivalences.

Because I am not born Alevi, my positionality within fieldwork has often been indefinite and uncomfortable. Often it was emphasized that I would never really understand things as an Alevi would. However, sometimes, when Alevi friends, respondents or interlocutors realized that my knowledge and engagement with Alevi practices was thicker than what they would expect from an outsider, by irony I was pointed out as *more* or *better* Alevi then the Alevis. Moreover, because I am not born Turkish, Turkish non-Alevis would never perceive me as 'possibly an Alevi' but always and only as a 'researcher of Alevism'. In many ways with this study, I wish to show how complex, problematic and aleatory these dynamics of ethnic subjectification can be.

As for praxis within much contemporary queer, feminist and post-humanist theory (i.e. Muñoz 1999, Tlostanova et al. 2016, Braidotti 2012), over fieldwork, I

[20] Reflecting on the way a sense of victimhood may authorise oppression, and oppressors may see themselves as victims, anthropologist Jenny White (2018) commented that models which see 'oppression from above' and 'resistance from below' are not useful to understand contemporary Turkish daily political life.

learnt to *dis-identify* out of my own class, gender, status, socio-cultural background and the like.[21] Being born in Italy rather than in Turkey and holding an Italian rather than a Turkish passport, meant that I encountered limits in conducting this research. Nevertheless, these were never as many as the advantages. My Italian citizenship and attachment to a prestigious University in England conferred me with structural privileges which have been a reassurance throughout the authoritarian turn of the AKP government, the restrictions of civil freedoms and the disintegrating financial situation in Turkey over the last years.[22] My positioning as an Italian, independent, 'white', childless, single man in his 30s meant for instance that I could sign contested petitions for peace without the risk of incurring in the same risks as Turkish students, intellectuals and artists. Even after signing, I was not detained or indicted, nor I experienced persecution or intimidation as many others did. The problems I experienced have been limited to bureaucratic hassle in obtaining visas to reside in Turkey or needing to leave the country when such visas were over.

Studying Aleviness and its engrained marginality meant however that I have been compelled to face other types of discomforts and anxieties which characterise any long-term fieldwork experience. Worries were mostly related to public receptions of my open-yet-always-invisible bisexuality, the absence of a steady partnership, or my 'vocation' to work in financially unpromising sectors, such as both academia and the performing arts can be, in Turkey, as elsewhere. Also,

[21] Similarly, referencing Virginia Woolf, Scheper-Hughes had called for one's distancing from 'old and unreal royalties', such as 'ridding oneself of pride of family, nation, religion, pride of sex and gender, and all the other dangerous loyalties that spring from them' (1995: 420).

[22] For instance, as I write in May 2019, I learn that, due to alleged 'irregularities and corruption', Turkey's High Election Board ruled a re-run for elections for Istanbul's mayor, held in March, during which the AKP party in power lost for the first time in a generation, or that the Turkish Lira fell again nearly 10% against the dollar over the last two months. ('Istanbul election being rerun to save grants, say Erdoğan opponents' *The Guardian*, accessed on 10 May 2019).

research among professional performers, but failure in producing artistic work within the scope of the research, often meant coming to terms with the frustration of writing about others' artistic processes and not allowing myself to delve into my own creative ambitions and needs. The most important type of professionalism that I had to nurture was research and scholarly working discipline, always 'sit down and write' and never 'stand up and act', which too often revealed to be frustrating and solitary endeavours.

As for Shepers-Hughes' militant anthropology, and similarly to Conquergood's critical performance ethnography (1985; 1998), I wish my ethnography to be professional in the sense of being based on moral accountability for what I saw as well as for what I failed to see, and how I acted and failed to act in critical situations (Shepers-Hughes 1995:437). Such professionalism implied careful evaluation on how to behave in the daily life during the years of the research, especially between 2015 and 2016. How to keep focusing on writing while learning that the French friend who had just hosted me a week earlier in Istanbul got arrested for joining a protest in support of Syrian refugees, accused of being a spy on the media and finally repatriated to France? What to do when a Syrian friend is refused a visa to visit the UK despite being invited to present her award-winning documentary at the British Film Institute? What to do when an Alevi friend who works as a human rights activist is refused asylum in Germany while at the same at risk of detention if relocating to Turkey? What to say to a friend who just lost her younger brother, killed while he was visiting her in Ankara during a brutal terrorist attack in the city centre? How to document the episode during which, at Atatürk Airport in Istanbul, the security confiscates my *bağlama* because of the alleged danger that its strings may cause? Such glimpses at daily life during the

time of the research rarely transpire in this thesis. Similarly, I often fail to grasp the underlying material bases beneath what I am writing about, often unable to track the flowing of money across the production, circulation and reception of the theatre works that I analyse, nor of the implicit motives of the funding bodies supporting my research.

In such a scenario, my writing often scales back to construct a patchwork of 'partial, plural, incomplete, and contingent understandings' (Denzin 2003:8), cultivating immediacy and involvement rather than analytic distance or detachment. In terms of an overall narrative, I try to coherently represent how the research experience informed my analysis, moving linearly in chronological terms (looking first at earlier performance pieces and following my encounter with them). As for the partial and incomplete narratives within the larger one, I wish to remain accountable for the specificity of all the face-to-face and collective events which informed my grasping of understandings. At the same time, I am conscious of the fictional nature of textual representations and ethnographic vignettes of such accounts, while trying to do justice to the *passion* and *anarchy* of such encounters, but 'without presuming to transcend or reduce their mystery' (Rapport 2015:263). Despite the ideal intention of protecting the identity of my interlocutors and disclosing it only after the participants express request to do so, the praxis of working with professional performers requires acknowledging of other dynamics of power within the construction of knowledge. As public figures, interlocutors were often practiced in accounting for their artistic work and overall lives, often not pleased by the idea of being made anonymous, and possibly afraid of losing control

over the construction of research evidence.[23] Similar dynamics in the shifts of vulnerable and authoritative position in the construction of textual representation may be suggested for writing which addresses fieldwork with recognized religious figures, as the vignette inserted in 1.3 may illustrate. Similarly to Heike Roms (2016), I try to make transparent how the establishment of scholarly evidence about the existence and relevance of staged adaptations of the Alevi *semah*s constitutes itself a situated, negotiated, interpersonal, collaborative, and ultimately performative event.[24] In Chapter 4, I push such a layer of performative self-reflexivity further by discussing how I negotiated the construction of kinetic evidence as an eventful and processual endeavour through critical use of movement notation during fieldwork. Moreover, the case study discussed in Chapter 5 constitutes itself a reflection on the way evidence of the existence of the Alevi community in Turkey was originated through a national method for performance ethnography which since the 1980s staged Alevi rituals by Alevi and non-Alevi actors.

[23] In terms of transcription and written reconstruction of the fieldwork experience, due to the larger scope of this project, in this thesis I did not accomplish the same methodology experimented for my Research Master's dissertation (De Rosa 2013). In that work, I managed to co-produce research data with a unique inter-subjective character, such as negotiated and accessible transcriptions of the recorded interviews and a collaboratively re-constructed and chorally approved version of my field diary. In these documents the choice of using or not pseudonyms was discussed and decided with the people concerned, sometimes altering, erasing or adding whole new sentences. Even though extremely time costing, such a working procedure proved to be ethically gratifying because of its cooperative results, as well as fruitful in amplifying inter-subjective accuracy.

[24] Scheper-Hughes summarised a similar ethical dilemma by questioning whether facts in the world are uncovered or produced in the context of research (1995:436). Like Roms (2016:179), I am aware of the way an inter-personal approach may be productive in establishing networks for the reunion of performers which are independent of the researcher's initiative. For instance, in December 2017, two of the theatre professionals whom I had independently met to discuss their participation in *Kardeşlik Töreni-Samah* (the piece analysed in Chapter 5) informed me that participation in my research inspired them to organise a reunion with two other members of the original cast whom they had not met for about 25 years.

The ethical and intersubjective underpinning of this research means also that writing constitutes an attempt to give a shape to my vast curiosity for Alevi people and performers. Writing was not conceived just for its own sake, but rather as action and intervention, an intention that reflects in what may at times realise in a polemical writing style. Whilst I wish this textual material to reach beyond the insular academic niches and to be of use for Alevi scholars and activists more than only for outsiders to Aleviness, I refrain from aspiring to speak for any Alevi perspective. Rather than as a 'subaltern' voice, I ultimately see Alevi figures and cultural agents as producers of a very articulate and complex intellectual apparatus, which can speak powerfully for itself, both within and beyond Alevi cultural enclaves.[25] Many of the artists who worked in the productions that I investigated (either as researchers, directors, choreographers, musicians, dancers or actors) are themselves successful scholars, writers, or bloggers. Rather than assuming their need for any objectivist or realist outsider point of view, I analysed their work and their networks out of the conviction that an external perspective may expand cultural reflection and production. Embracing the perspective of the ethnographer, the kinetographer, if not of the research dramaturg, through some cultural or artistic distance, my writing wishes to benefit the daily people involved, rather than constitute a detached academic exercise. For instance, I concur with Denzin (2003:55-56) and Conquergood (1985:10) in toiling for a writing that is critical, pedagogical and empowering because of its dialogic character. In short, this thesis is written *to* and *with* the Alevis, rather than *about* them. As for the

[25] For instance, within his discussion of early twentieth century writing on Alevism which is based on Gayatri Spivak's postcolonial theorization, Hakkı Taş pointed out how over the last decades Alevism became 'the locus of an intensifying academic industry' (2015:325).

contribution that I wish to bring ‘back home’ however, I hope that this analysis may be refreshing for outsiders to the studies of Alevism, Performance and Movement for it affords the possibility of learning about a specific sense of community life, human values and resilience which I experienced within Alevi ritual and performing arts contexts. Ultimately, building intersubjectivity within the writing means acknowledging that the texts are finally constructed in their reading and reception: gaining awareness that texts are to be read in the writer’s bodily absence, acquiring a life of their own which may be risky and unpredictable because devoid of her control and possibility of defence.

1.6 Structure and contents of the thesis

The thesis is divided in two volumes: the first volume provides an overall discussion of the argument, interdisciplinary subject areas, literature and methodology, and the second volume deals with specific case studies. Each of these volumes is composed of three chapters. Although the first volume is conceived to be more preparatory and introductory and the second volume to be more illustrative of specific case studies, original material derived from fieldwork research and critical evaluation is nonetheless sprinkled throughout the whole thesis.

Chapter 2, ‘Socio-political contexts of the research: Aleviness and Alevism’, familiarizes the readers with debates on Alevi identities and histories, on Alevi political requests within and beyond the Turkish national framework, as well as on issues of Alevi migration and cosmopolitanism. Before the actual analysis of the adaptation of expressive material originating from Alevi ritual contexts into

performing arts frameworks, this chapter helps the reader grasp the contemporary 'explosion' of Alevi identities in Turkey and internationally.

Chapter 3, 'The *semah*s and Alevi rituals: narratives, performance and professionalisation', resorts to ethnographic insight and cross-readings in Alevis studies and performance theory to approach the most salient changes in contemporary Alevi rituals, especially by focusing on the role of the *semah*s. The chapter argues that the professionalisation of the Alevis in the performing arts contributed to formal changes in ritual performances, which have at times reproduced, other times challenged, traditional religious hierarchies and gender norms. This professionalisation also characterized the modalities through which Alevi rituals have been adapted beyond the religious contexts and embedded in secular performing arts projects. Not sufficiently explained by the familiar or spiritual attachments of their makers, such projects resist the 'domestication' of Aleviness auspicated by the national discourse as well as the marketization of Aleviness for the demands of the entertainment industry. The chapter thus expunges the quality of this performance professionalisation in relation to specific artists' civic commitment in fostering the public and transnational transmission, (re)production and diffusion of an otherwise silenced Alevi memory.

Chapter 4, 'Performing critical Kinetography', familiarizes the reader with some of the most recurring *semah* movement morphologies that I witnessed and learned within several Alevi ritual and public context during ethnographic fieldwork research. Accordingly, I discuss how the use of the Kinetography Laban and other Laban-derived notation tools enabled me to appreciate the modalities through which the staged adaptations discussed in the second volume altered, re-interpreted and transgressed such recurring kinetic forms. The use of notation for

movement analysis and description is examined critically, not only for its limits and benefits as an archiving device, but also as a crucial methodological strategy used during fieldwork. Self-reflectively, the chapter discusses how the use of notation (and to a different extent, the engagement in *bağlama* classes) enabled me to rehearse and perform a credible ethnographic posture in conversation with the interlocutors during fieldwork. Assessing such ethnographic methodological choices, the chapter asks what other efforts have been made in the past to adapt the *semah* movements in notation forms and how different modes of cultural transmission have been intermingled in contemporary Alevi contexts.

Chapter 5, 'Alevi ritual in staged performance: *Kardeşlik Töreni-Samah* (1983-2018)' is the first of three case studies which exemplify how staged adaptation of Alevi expressive rituals had a pivotal role in shaping contemporary Alevi cultures. The piece discussed here is an experimental theatre production with the title *Kardeşlik Töreni – Samah* (lit. 'The Ritual of Brotherhood – Samah'), which since 1983, offered a dramatized public reconstruction of the emblematic ritual of the Alevis, the *ayn-i cem*. Produced by the Ankara Deneme Sahnesi (lit. 'Ankara Experimental Stage'), an Ankara-based theatre company formed by both Alevis and not-Alevi amateur actors, the piece was directed by the late Professor Nurhan Karadağ (1943–2015), an influential scholar of Turkish folk theatre traditions, himself not born to an Alevi family. The chapter argues that the piece aimed at providing a performative and dynamic archive for the *semah*s which was meant to be accessible both nationally and internationally. As performative and dynamic archive, *Kardeşlik Töreni – Samah* fostered a reconfiguration of the political and social understandings of Aleviness. Through an analysis of the scholarly research that led to the theatre piece and some of the directorial and choreographic

strategies in it, the chapter conveys how the resilience and longevity of *Kardeşlik Töreni – Samah* relied on a delicate compromise between the secretive character of the rituals and the public nature of the theatre.

The case study discussed in the Chapter 6, 'Performing transnational Aleviness: *Doğa Aşkına – Terre, Mon Amour* (2014)', takes us to a diasporic location, investigating reconfigurations of Alevi social life through the frame of a mega-event staged in 2014 at the Palais des Congrès in Paris. The chapter articulates how the event reflected and instituted a form of 'vernacular cosmopolitanism' through its engagement with global environmental organisations and the commemoration of dramatic events in contemporary Alevi history, as well as of persecuted heterodox groups in Medieval Europe. The main French Alevi organisation, the *Federation of the Alevis in France* (FUAF) planned the event in alliance with two of the major non-governmental ecologist unions operating in Turkey and in France, namely *Doğa Derneği* and the *Nicolas Hulot Foundation*. With the titled *Doğa Aşkına* (lit. 'To the love of nature') in Turkish, and *Terre, Mon Amour* ('Earth, my Love') in French, the event celebrated the 15th anniversary since the establishment of FUAF as well as World Environment Day. In the chapter, I unpack how the event was promoted with gigantic tones that are reminiscent of other similar festivals organised by the Alevis in Europe, such as *Bın Yılın Türküsü* (lit. 'The Türkü of the Millenium') organised by the *Almanya Alevi Birlikleri Federasyonu* (Federation of Alevi Unions of Germany) in 2000 at the Cologne Arena. The chapter discusses the event by analysing three sets of materials: promotional poster, clips and merchandize released before and during the event; an environmental Alevi manifesto presented during the event and the juxtaposition on the stage of a crowded traditional *semah* 'turned' by French-Alevi *semahcı*s

next to a *semah*-inspired dance piece which was performed by an Istanbul-based professional troupe.

Chapter 7, 'Concealing Aleviness and mourning loss in the Gezi protest's aftermath: *"biz"* (2014)' interrogates how choreo-musical knowledge pertaining to the *semah*s was reinvented into a more contemporary dance movement vocabulary. The chapter focuses on the *semah*s' intimate and imaginative adaptation in the work of the Istanbul-based choreographer Bedirhan Dehmen (born in 1978). Especially, I analyse the artistic exploration resulted in *"biz"* (lit. 'we'), first performed in Istanbul in 2014. Here three male dancers move in resonance to some Alevi tunes improvised live on the stage by musician Cem Yıldız with voice and electro-*bağlama*. In this chapter, I argue that without aspiring to affirm and explain Aleviness, the dramaturgy of *"biz"* reframed some Alevi expressive forms by melting them together with fresher and hyper-mobile sonic and kinetic languages. For instance, a dance technique based on Contact Improvisation in the piece makes it difficult for the non-Alevi spectator to decode the Alevi themes in the piece. Embodying a state of vulnerability and grief, the dancers invite the spectator to mourn those who died during the wave of protests started in Istanbul's Gezi Park in 2013, all of whom had an Alevi background. In the chapter, an ethnographic vignette illustrates the enactment of *"biz"* during the *Europalia:Turkey* festival in Brussels in 2016, and the difficulty of a non-Alevi, Turkish-speaking, Dutch spectator in decoding the Alevi themes in the composition. The chapter thus discusses the complexities in the movement vocabulary, the social and artistic context of creation during the Gezi Park protests' aftermath and the lack of references to Aleviness in the reviews appeared in Turkey and in its presentation within the *Europalia: Turkey* festival.

PART ONE

2. Social Contexts of the Research: Aleviness and Alevism

2.1 Introduction

In the preface of an edited collection on Alevi 'transformed identities', the scholar Irene Markussen tells how the term 'Alevilik' (sometimes translated in English as Aleviness, sometimes as Alevism) may be explained by the Alevis by reference to several core themes, such as the recounting of tales of persecution and suffering, or the portrayal of a socio-political orientation blending themes of migration, urbanisation, secularism and socialism, often filled with description of traditional ritual practices and fervent love for the Imam Ali. One of her informants explained:

> To understand what Alevilik means to a person (…) is to put all these things together in a bag, shake it well, open it and see how it all comes together. And for each Alevi you ask, and maybe each time you ask the person as well, you'll have to shake the bag again. (Markussen 2005a:7)

The quotation illustrates the quality of dynamism and attitude to transformation inherent in any articulation of Alevi identity, but also the standardized reference to several core themes that the scholar of *Alevilik* may encounter. This dynamism may be considered to lie behind the lack of consensus among Alevi religious circles and political associations, as well among the Alevis who do not subscribe to any specific organisation, over the important major question of what the core of Alevi identity is. 'Who are the Alevis?' or 'What is Alevism?', are difficult questions to answer exhaustively and impartially. Such lack of agreement persists also among scholars working in Alevi studies. In this chapter, I will address them by offering the reader a brief overview of debates about Alevi identities and histories, Alevi

political requests within and beyond the Turkish national framework, as well as issues of Alevi migration and cosmopolitanism. Even though the discussion that follows cannot be more than a very limited glimpse on the complexity of the issues, it will assist the reader to navigate the thesis by offering a sketch of the context in which this research took place.

2.2 Alevism and Aleviness as social movements

As a preliminary summary of the complexity of influences which contributed to shaping contemporary and transnational articulations of Alevi practices and beliefs, it is helpful to quote a brief overview of the multifaceted religious components which co-exist within it, as offered by the anthropologist Ruth Mandel:

> (The Alevis) follow a mystical "Sufi" belief system, loosely sharing many tenets with Shi'ism. Scholars speculate about their origins and influences: they are believed by some to have descended from Zoroastrians; others proposed they originate from Gnostic, Manichaenist, neo-Platonist, pantheist or even early Anatolian Christian cults. Some theories link them closely to Kurdish and Iranian influences. Others (propounded by some nationalist Turkish politicians, as well as Alevi leaders) would connect Alevilik with pre-Islamic Turkic shamanic belief systems. Van Bruinessen convincingly argues that the so-called Kurdish Alevis most likely descend from Kurdish- and Zaza-speaking followers of a variety of 'syncretist-ghulat-influenced sects'. (Mandel 2008: 251)

Despite the richness of religious influences and components within it, there is however no agreement on whether the category of 'religion' or that of 'culture' are more helpful in understanding what *Alevilik* is. Whilst Olsson et al. (1998) emphasised that Alevism is better understood as culture rather than religion, the sociologist Şehriban Şahin (2005) analysed Alevism as a public religion emerging from Islam. Janina Karowlewsky (2008) discussed the inadequacy and historical inaccuracy of explaining Alevism as an Islamic heterodoxy, whilst Markus Dressler

(2013) historicized the emergence of the category within new discourses of religious and ethnic difference during the nation-building politics of the last years of the Ottoman Empire and the first years of the Turkish Republic (roughly between the 1890s and the 1940s, the Republic being officially proclaimed in 1923). As Dressler demonstrated, it is in this period that the term started to denote "heterodox", even though still Muslim, forms of religiosity, often seen as intrinsically Turkish. Aykan Erdemir remarked how the term is currently often used in Turkey as 'an umbrella term to refer to various religious groups' comprising 'a heterogeneous group of Turkish, Kurmanji, Zaza, Arabic, and Albanian speaking non-Sunni Muslims, believed to comprise 15 to 25 per cent of Turkey's population' (2005: 938).

As a working definition, in this thesis, I will use the term 'Alevi' to refer to important cultural and ethno-religious groups that constitute Turkey's second largest religious community after the Sunnis, and that are largely found not only in Turkey but also in diasporic communities, especially in Germany and other areas of Central and Northern Europe. I will adopt Élise Massicard's distinction between *Aleviness* as the 'sociological phenomenon and the fact of belonging to an Alevi group by birth' and *Alevism* as 'the mobilization in the name of Aleviness, which rationalises it and sets it up as a cause' (2013: 5–6). In other words, whereas Aleviness points to a sociological fact, Alevism points more to the overall objective of campaigning for the emancipation and recognition of the rights of the Alevis; people who engage with it are thus more accurately referred to as Alevists (Massicard 2012). As I recognize that the task of tackling the Alevi identity issue is a complex one, I follow Massicard also in setting my goal to be that of trying 'to understand, if not what Alevism is, at least, how it works' (2003:125).

Nonetheless, even when discussing Aleviness, I wish to privilege a language of process (ethnicization, de-ethnicization), rather than one of fixity ascribed by birth (i.e. see Mandel 2008: 21). My intention in privileging such processes of ethnicization focuses my attention on the artistic projects of 'Alevi-making' on the stage which I will discuss in the following chapters. This is because in the contexts of such dramatic projects, *Alevi* often refers to all those who understand themselves as such, including those Alevis who do not consider themselves Muslims, as well as those whose Aleviness was acquired through embodied engagement with Alevi expressive cultures rather than through descent, initiation or engagement with a ritual activity. I thus understand such initiatives of 'Alevi-making through the stage' as instances of 'alevitizing' and 'de-alevitizing' processes which compel us to reassess the category in historically-informed, processual, relational and dynamically embodied terms. The term is thus crucially understood also as a 'situational' marker capable of comprising those individuals who consider themselves as such, despite the lack of any formal bond to a specific group.

Since the Turkish government does not recognise Aleviness as a social category, an official census does not exist. It is however estimated that the Alevis account for between 10% and 30% of the Turkish population (Erdemir 2005:938; Erol 2010:36; Massicard 2012:12 n.2; Tambar 2010:653; Vorhoff 1998:228), or about 15 million people (Zeidan 1999:74). Since they do not speak a distinct language, the Alevis are often not recognized as an ethnic group but more frequently called a sub-ethnic, ethno-religious, heterodox, heterogeneous or cultural group. Erdemir noted that their mother tongues are predominantly Turkish, Kurmanji, Zaza and Arabic, as well as more peripherally Albanian (2005:938).

However, when we look at younger generations of Alevis who were born in diaspora communities in Europe, America and Australia, we are obliged to acknowledge that their mother-tongue is more often the official language of their country of birth.

The Alevis are generally described as non-Sunni Muslims and often associated with the Shi'a branch of Islam, which is located mostly in Iran. Usually the emphasis in devotion of the Alevis for the Imam Ali is given as an explanation for the term as "follower or devoted to Ali". A cousin and son-in-law of the prophet Muhammad, Ali is revered by all Muslim communities, but held in special regard by the Shiites, as well as by the Alevis (Shankland 2003:186). Together with the Shiites, many Alevis believe that Muhammad designated Ali as his successor and that the male descendants in this lineage were to succeed him as Muslim caliphs. Accordingly, they believe that the ancestors of the contemporary Sunnis wrongly stole the Caliphate after betraying Ali and assassinating his sons Hasan and Hüseyin and their followers during the battle of Kerbela. This historical event is especially significant for the Alevis and, as Kehl-Bodrogi has shown (2016), its re-evocation is used to reinforce communal cohesion in the ongoing process of Alevi revitalization. Such re-evocation intensifies over the ten to twelve days of mourning (*muharrem*) during which the Alevis may fast and abstain from shaving, sexual intercourse and drinking water, for their part in memory of Hasan and Hüseyin's agony.

On their side, the Sunnis do not believe Ali to be the rightful successor to Muhammad and they often label the veneration of the Alevis and of the Shiites for Ali as 'unacceptable polytheism' (Mandel 2008: 281). Nonetheless, the characterization of the Alevis as the Turkish Shiites is not a sufficient element to

explain their religious difference. Indeed, despite their common veneration for Ali and the *ehl-i beyt* ('the people of the house') [26], their doctrines and practices differ in important ways from those of the Shiites and share little with the forms of religiosity found in Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, India, and among the Syrian Alawites. This Alevi specificity depends on its Anatolian location and its assumed ancestral proximity and descent from shamanic cultures scattered all over the Turkic world and Central Asia. In this sense, Alevism is often presented as the remnant of the 'pure' belief system of the Shamanic Turks before the Islamization of Anatolia occurred throughout the 12th to the 16th century, as first postulated by the Republican historian Fuat Köprülü, as we shall see in the next section.

2.3 Alevis in historical dimensions

Starting with the work of Köprülü, the lineage that connects the Alevis to Central Asian Shamanism has been endorsed by identifying their ancestors in the *Kızılbaş*. Establishing a strong relation between Anatolian Islam and Central Asia, Köprülü looked at the Kizilbaş-Alevis as the least Islamized Turkmen tribes within an ethnically homogenous Turkish nation. This and related theories were further elaborated and disseminated by the Russian-born French turcologist Irene Mélikoff (i.e. 1998; 2003) [27] and by the Turkish scholar Ahmet Yaşar Ocak. These resulted in the currently widespread assumptions according to which the Alevis profess a quintessentially syncretic belief system that was inherited from Turkmen tribes that

[26] The term derives from the Arabic and refers to the Prophet Mohammed, his daughter Fatima, Ali, cousin of Muhammed and husband of Fatima, and their sons Hasan and Hüseyin' (Kelh-Bodrogi 2016:44, n.7).

[27] The reader should not be confused by the petty occurrence which wants three eminent scholars in Alevi studies to share names and similar surnames; the other two Irene-s of Alevi studies being the Canadian ethnomusicologist of Bulgarian descent Irene Markoff and the already mentioned Swedish sociologist of religion Irene Markussen.

settled on the Anatolian peninsula but in locations distant from urban centres. Because of their remoteness and their lacking sufficient knowledge of Arabic and Persian, such tribes were thus ‘insufficiently Islamized’. Because of its pervasiveness in shaping any discourse about the Alevis in terms of religious difference, this theory has been recently summarized and critiqued as the ‘Köprülü paradigm’. Markus Dressler has shown how, together with that of Baha Said, the work of Köprülü had an extremely weighty role in the creation of the ‘Alevi’ as a new ethno-religious category which would fit the goals of the nationalist and Sunni-oriented agenda of the newly founded Turkish Republic. This understanding replaced earlier speculations of Western observers and missionaries, many of whom had seen in the Alevis ‘the remnants of ancient Anatolian and Christian cultures and traditions’ (Dressler 2013:239). The ‘Köprülü paradigm’ forms thus the backbone of what I will refer to as 'Turkish national discourse' on Aleviness, namely its understanding as 'the Turkish form of Islam par excellence' (Van Bruinessen 2016:49), through which it became possible to discern 'beliefs and rituals of pre-Islamic Turkish religion, commonly described as *shamanism*' (ibid.).

In a recent review of the critiques of this paradigm, Zeynep Oktay Uslu has underlined how, whereas such ‘heterodox’ groups were in fact thoroughly Islamized, Köprülü relied on an unsubstantiated dichotomy between urban and rural religious practices (2017:2-3). Even more importantly, since Köprülü emphasized that such processes occurred primarily in a Turkmen milieu, the role of the Kurdish components in the formation of Alevi belief and practice remained unquestioned (ibid.). Accordingly, studies of Aleviness in Turkey have been strongly entangled within a Turkish nationalist agenda. More than only neglecting the Kurdish components within Aleviness, already since the early Kemalist

experiments of ethnic engineering, these studies often used 'the Turkish dimension of Alevism in order to assimilate the Alevi Kurds more quickly' (Van Bruinessen 2016:49). Such experiments contributed to current complexities in the articulations of religious, linguistic, ethnic, national and transnational identities, for whose analysis strongly intersectional approaches are needed. In this sense, knowledge about the contemporary transnational production of Alevi cultures, here pursued through an examination of staged adaptations of the *semah*s, certainly benefits from and irradiates throughout research areas adjacent to Alevi studies, starting with Kurdish studies.

Academic studies of Aleviness and Alevism have flourished enormously since the 2000s. In a trailblazing essay published in 2003, the historian Hamit Bozarslan (2003) pointed to the need for a new sociological agenda for research on the Alevis. To this end, he unravelled three myths which had surrounded their academic study. These were: 1) the idea that in the 'long-term history' the Alevis had been in constant opposition to the state; 2) their perception as natural allies of the Kemalist republic, whose state-enforced promotion of laicism would have secured them freedom of speech and belief (a perception that persists regardless of several revolts of Kurdish Alevi groups against the government and their brutal repression, such as during the 'Dersim massacre' in 1937-1938);[28] finally, 3) the ‚med association of Alevi lifestyles with democratic values. In many ways, these myths persist today, not only in political and social discourses, but also in academic literature.

[28] According to Bozarslan (2003:10), the often silenced memory of the event constitutes one of the main dilemmas that Kemalist Alevis were facing in the early 2000s. Van Bruinessen (1994) discusses whether the episode should be understood as a genocide or an ethnocide.

Another tenet which holds strong and remained unquestioned despite the expansion of Alevi studies is the enigmatic character that surrounds their very existence as a separate socio-historical group. For instance, it is remarkable that Bozarslan's essay was published as part of an important collection which covered the 'Alevi question' exhaustively with the aim of removing the 'many conundrums' that the Alevis from Turkey had presented to Western observers (Jongerden and White 2003: xi). Notwithstanding the quality of the contributions in that collection, its problematic title (*Turkey's Alevi Enigma*) accentuated those aspects of Aleviness that defy understanding, ending up by relegating it to a dimension of irrationality and mystery. As such, that publication set the tone for the scholarly research to follow over the next decades contributing to the imaginative construction of the 'Alevis' within an English language-based global knowledge industry at the cost of a subtly orientalizing and essentialising trend. The enigma which has been ascribed to the Alevis is related to the common associations of their rituals with qualities of secrecy and marginality, qualities which are reflected in their limited presence in official historiography. In fact, as Élise Massicard argued, the history of the Alevis typically oscillates between concealment (Massicard calls it *occultation*) and celebration: on the one hand, nationalist ideologies restricted attention to state institutions, and on the other hand, since the 1980s, identity affirmation processes encouraged the Alevis to start writing their own historical narratives in celebratory tones (2013:11). In many ways, this enigmatic character has been due to the absence of written official records about the Alevis and at the same time to the nurturing in Alevi contexts of other forms of cultural transmission that are more dependent on music and movement.

The musical and choreographic traditions of the Alevis counterbalanced in important ways the silence created by their scarce traces in the institutional record during the pre-1980s period. Such inscriptions of Alevi pasts in bodily and performative forms testifies how the Alevis have been resilient in cultivating a vigorous memorialization of their historical distress, even when disguising their identities and practices. It is therefore not surprising that glimpses of Alevi history have often been attempted by ethno-musicologists and ethno-choreologists. Nonetheless, despite the prevalence of musical and choreographic traces, recent trends in Alevi historiography have reconsidered the relevance and use of written sources within Alevi cultures, ultimately challenging the rather widespread assumption that Aleviness did not rely on textual methods of cultural transmission. Several studies have appeared over the last decade that provide fresh glimpses into the Alevi literary canon (Ayfer Karakaya-Stump 2008; Yıldırım 2011; Karolewski 2015; Oktay 2017, among others). For instance, as I will explore further in chapter 4, these analyses of textual evidence may force us to reassess the historicity and changes of bodily forms within Alevi rituals. As these studies reveal, within the Ottoman and Republican official record, it is possible to find textual information about several distinct groups from the Balkans to South-Eastern Anatolia that contributed to shaping common trans-regional Alevi practices. The ancestors of the contemporary Alevis living within and beyond the contemporary geographical borders of Turkey, would thus have been very varied. The above mentioned *Kizilbaş*, as well as the *Bektaşi*s and the *Abdal*s of Rum, would have been very prominent among these, but not exclusive.

The historian Ayfer Karakaya-Stump remarks how the Kızılbaş constituted ‘a union of various concurring mystical formations and antinomian dervish groups

which through the course of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries coalesced under the Safavid banner' (2008:210). The term *Kızılbaş* (lit. 'red head') originally indicated the red turbans that the followers of Shah Ismail, the founder of the Shi'ite Safavid Dynasty[29], used to wear during the battles they fought against the Ottomans at Çaldıran (1514), for example. The Kızılbaş became particularly resistant to assimilation since they inhabited the territories in between the Ottoman and the Safavid Empires, being the main competitors of the Ottomans in the area. Their resilience was not only asserted on political and juridical grounds, but also on doctrinal and religious ones. Since they were often persecuted, during the Ottoman period the Kızılbaş were often not recognized by a definite name but were called heretic (*zındık*), schismatic (*râfizi*), shi'ite or atheist (*mülhid*) (Mélikoff 1998). Blending of *kızılbaş* tribal legacies with Islam would thus underpin the Alevi 'heterodoxy'. It is remarkable that the term *kızılbaş* is still used today in Turkey with connotations of threat, disloyalty and immorality to disparage the Alevis[30]. For instance, in 2013 Alevi groups protested the decision of the government to name the third bridge built to span the Bosporus after Yavuz Selim Sultan, an emperor whose harsh policies secured him an uninviting name (*Yavuz* meaning 'Grim' in Turkish), also because of his persecutory and sectarian rule against them (Tharoor 2016).

[29] Shah Ismail ruled during the first half of the sixteenth century and his Empire was located in present day Iran and Azerbaijan.

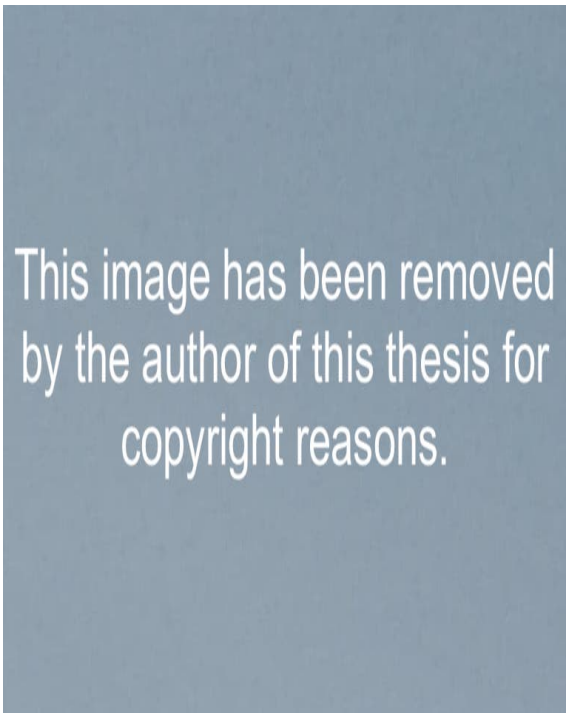
[30] For instance, only in 1980 the Langenscheidt German-Turkish dictionary dropped 'kızılbaşlık' as a translation of the German word *Blutschande* (incest) after a request by the newly founded *Yurtsevenler Birliği Federasyonu* (YBF, Federation of Patriots Unions) (Sökefeld 2008:52). Such an association is due to the lack of knowledge which often led the Alevis to be often blamed for practicing debauchery and incest during their rituals, which would be consumed while ritual candles extinguish (the expression *müm söndürmek*, lit. 'extinguishing the candles', is usually used with derogatory tones to refer to such a degeneracy).

As for the *Bektaşi*s, their name derives from their continuing devotion for the popular saint Hacı Bektaş Veli. A spiritual leader arriving from Central Asia to Anatolia during the thirteenth century, the saint is often represented while embracing a gazelle with his right hand and caressing a lion with his left to represent his gift of reconciliation (see fig. 1, see further discussion in 6.3).[31] Whereas the Kızılbaş were mostly nomads or semi-nomads and located in the rural and Eastern areas of the Ottoman Empire, the Bektaşis were mostly settled in urban and Western areas, especially in the Balkans. Their sedentary lifestyle is reflected in their organisation around worship houses called *tekke*s, structures roughly equivalent to monasteries in Christianity. Unlike the Kızılbaş, the Bektaşi constitute a *tarikat*, namely a Sufi religious order to which one becomes affiliated after initiation. As demonstrated by their close ties with the Janissary corps, the Bektaşi were more involved with the establishment of the Ottoman Empire than the more rebellious Kızılbaş. The Ottoman government may have encouraged an alliance between the Kızılbaş and the Bektaşis, as it often 'used *colonising dervishes*, often heterodox and sometimes Bektashis, to invade and then Islamicize the lands they conquered' (Massicard 2013:14). Despite officially sanctioning it, Ottoman policies started to promote the Bektaşi order as the only legitimate representative of the legacy of Hacı Bektaş Veli (Karakaya-Stump 2008:209). It is possible that the Ottomans aimed to undermine the growing influence of the Safavids among communities affiliated with the saint's cult (ibid.). According to the historian of Turkish and Iranian Sufism Thierry Zarcone (2018:58-

[31] First published in 1937, John Kingsley Birge remains still an important reference source about Bektashism in English. Soileau (2014) offers a more recent discussion on themes of ortopraxy and heteropraxy related to the saint's life and contemporary Bektaşi community. Frances Trix (1993) offers a biography of Baba Rexheb, founder of the first Bektaşi community in the United States, as well as an history of the Bektaşi order with emphasis on the Balkans as well as its transposition to Egypt and America.

59), some of the more recent developments involving an 'Alevi opening' under the AKP government, closely resemble that assimilatory Ottoman strategy, as we will see in 2.4.

Figure 1. Portrait of Hacı Bektaş Veli at the mausoleum in Hacıbektaş, Nevşehir. Source: Hacıbektaş Belediyesi (2015).



Current studies suggest that the co-option of several antinomian groups into the *Bektaşi* order resulted in a blend incorporating elements of pre-existing Anatolian, Christian and Central Asian worship, with beliefs and practices of Shi' Islam and other forms of Islamic mysticism. In fact, even if the Alevis are better understood as an ethno-religious group and the *Bektaşi* more as a religious order (*tarikat*), the two still share many doctrines and ritual practices[32]. For instance, both

[32] I suggest understanding the difference between a religious order and an ethno-religious group henceforth: whether one becomes Bektaşi after initiation, normally only individuals who are born to Alevi parents are considered to be Alevis.

share devotion to the saint Hacı Bektaş Veli, whose mausoleum in the town of Hacıbektaş, not far from tourist destinations in Cappadocia, still hosts every August the most crowded and publicly recognized Alevi and Bektaşi political and religious festival[33] (see fig. 2 and 3). As rivals within Islam, these antinomian groups were neither members of the dominant group nor protected by the relative autonomy that other religious communities enjoyed through the *millet* system[34]. The mixture explains in part how, over the nineteenth and twentieth century's Ottoman and post-Ottoman rule, an 'Alevi' trans-regional identity (often also indicated through the compound designation 'Alevi-Bektaşi'), came to be used as an umbrella category to denote those Muslim group whose beliefs and practices could not be incorporated into Sunni Islam.

Even though, among the religious groups that comprise the Alevi 'umbrella', only the Bektaşis constitute a Sufi religious order (*tarikat*), many accounts place Aleviness in the context of traditional forms of Sufi mysticism that are specific to the Anatolian peninsula (i.e see discussion in Markussen 2005b). Accordingly, as forerunners within Anatolian Sufism, the Alevis are often seen as the heirs of a form of vernacular humanism in which music plays a key role. Its carriers are bards and minstrels (*aşık*, *özan*) who recite from memory the names and praises of God and perpetuate a convention of oral poetical performance that dates to poets and saints living between the 13th and 16th century such as Yunus Emre, Nesimi, Pir

[33] See Massicard (2003) for a discussion of the festival as a central event within contemporary Alevism.

[34] Currently meaning 'nation', in Ottoman times the term indicated recognized religious communities which were given a certain degree of jurisditional and financial autonomy. Hans-Lukas Kieser (2007) discussed how the legal shifts from a Muslim to a secular Turkish nationalism in Late Ottoman and Early Republican Turkey had an impact on the Anatolian Alevis, especially Kurdish-speaking ones.

Sultan Abdal, Hatai and Kaygusuz Abdal[35]. It is thus no surprise that the centrality of music to Alevi traditions has been a catalyst for the revival and shaping of contemporary Alevi cultures. For instance, Irene Markoff (1986b) highlighted the religious importance that the Alevis give to the folk lute, the *bağlama*, and discussed how, during the second half of the 20th century, the popularization of Alevi music contributed to their achieving greater public acceptance, despite the official disregard for their forms of religiosity. Music contributed thus also to the de-mystification of many prejudices surrounding their identities and rituals, the most notorious being that Alevi rituals imply debauchery and incest since the expression *müm söndürmek*, lit. 'extinguishing the candles', was usually used with derogatory tones to refer to such elements of degeneracy.[36] Focusing on Alevi cultural production in terms of movement and dance rather than music, this study wishes to contribute to an understanding of how the performing arts have promoted greater public acceptance and de-mystification, often at the cost of the re-signification and misrecognition of Aleviness as a cultural, rather than a religious, phenomenon.

Figure 2. Pilgrims visit the Mausoleum in Hacibektaş during the festivities in August 2015. Photo by Sinibaldo De Rosa, August 2015 (following page).

[35] Biographies of these saints can be found in Dinçer (2014), Markoff (1986b), Özdemir (2016). Koerbin (2011a) is an important reference-study for understanding the development of Pir Sultan Abdal's figure as an historical and lyrical persona. Oktay Uslu (2017) offers an assessment of several manuscripts produced in Turkish vernacular by Kaygusuz Abdal and his successors in the 13th and 14th century, as well as for a translation and critical edition of one of Kaygusuz Abdal's works.

[36] For instance, Alevis associations in Germany have been outraged in 2007 when a public TV detective series broadcasted an episode whose storyline featured investigations on incest within an Alevi family (Tangen 2007). In Turkey, many Alevi campaigns are fought against the negative connotations embedded in Turkish language. For instance, in 2018 a popular family boardgame company was forced to remove the expression *mum söndürmek* as a clue to refer to the Alevis (Kahraman 2018) and the official regulatory body of Turkish language (*Türk Dil Kurumu*) was forced to remove the dispregiative term *vazalak* as a synonym of the word 'Alevi' on its vocabulary (Türk Dil Kurumu 2018).

Figure 3. Wall of a building recently erected in Hacibektaş. Photo by Sinibaldo De Rosa, August 2015.

2.4 Other narratives related to Alevi origins

The richness and ambiguity of Alevi rituals and oral musical traditions is often used to claim ancestries which are barely traceable in history. Discussions of the connections of Aleviness with Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Gnosticism, Manichaenism and neo-Platonism, remain very rare, both in a Turkish as well as in an international context. Parallels that bring Aleviness closer to Christianity are not as rare. These were first formulated by foreign observers and missionaries who visited the Ottoman empire during the 19th and 20th century (i.e. see discussions in Dressler 2013; Karowleski 2008; Keiser 2002; and Taş 2015). Whereas such similarities had been explored in studies written in English (Birge 1937), they were never easy to expose in a Turkish nationalist context where Alevi circles remained often more preoccupied with fitting into the rhetoric of the nation rather than appealing to notions of ethno-religious difference. Often, those who did expose such similarities had to take courageous positions that were opposed by Alevi circles and religious authorities. This was the case of the scholar Nejat Birdoğan who, after challenging many undisputed assumptions about Alevi cultures, such as their being intrinsically embedded within Islam (Tambar 2014:126) or 'democratic' (Bozarslan 2003:11), was eventually marginalised as *yol düşkünü* (roughly, 'excommunicated') and forbidden to participate in the rituals. One of his major studies (Birdoğan, 1990) is still quoted to explain the spirited polemics among Alevi scholars on the question of the Alevi origins (Tambar 2014:126-127). Faik Bulut also published a study with the title *Ali'siz Alevilik* (Aleviness without Ali) (1998) which decoupled Aleviness from Islam through the portrayal of the differences between the real and historical Ali (*Gerçek Ali*) and the mythic Ali (*Efsane Ali*) of Alevi devotion. Such studies provided some among the several alternative

hypotheses of the formation and development of Alevi early sources and roots, and their influences within the Arab, Iranian, Islamic, and Christian worlds.

More recently, some researchers have reassessed the emergence of Aleviness outside of political disputes after the advent of Islam, and a Turkish-Islamic synthesis framework, but often without caring much for standards of accuracy and reliability in historical analysis, nor providing adequate insights into the depth and complexity of the issues at stake. One of the most prominent of such researchers is Erdoğan Çınar, an architect by profession and an amateur historian, who over the last two decades has published a series of books that popularized two alternative versions of the origins of Aleviness (i.e. 1997, 2007). Many Alevis read Çınar's books eagerly, at times celebrating the audacity of his positions, at others remaining sceptical of his unsubstantiated historical approach. As I realised during fieldwork, although they remain scarcely discussed in academic literature, these narratives are gaining a certain popularity. Because I will refer to these works in my case studies (especially Chapter 6), I need to discuss here some of these versions of Aleviness which decentre the prominence of Ali in Alevi devotion, the links to the Shi'a and more generally the positioning of Aleviness within Islam.

The most publicized hypothesis advanced by Çınar is the one that designates Aleviness as an Ottoman version of medieval Christian heresies that were common within the Balkan–Byzantine world. It is in this context that Çınar noted some vague similarities between the Alevi *deyiş* and the music of the Provençal troubadours thus asserting that Alevi *özan*s had influence on European troubadour literature. Despite being very naïvely articulated, such resemblances led Çınar to suggest that prominent Alevi figures should be understood as heterodox Christians. For example, he argued that the Alevi saint and antinomian

rebel Pir Sultan Abdal would have lived much earlier than the 16th century, as generally assumed, and should instead be identified with the 7th century founder of the Paulicians, Constantine Silvanus (Çınar 1997: 140-142). Undoubtedly, such a hypothesis did not fail to create lively debate among Alevi and non-Alevi scholars. In his study of the *muhlas* (the self-naming convention that, like a signature, often closes an Alevi *deyiş*), the ethnomusicologist Paul Koerbin (2011a:65) remarked that Çınar's claim is indeed 'adventurous' but not unusual, as much as many figures who appear as lyrical persona within Alevi songs are never mentioned in official Ottoman records. Many other scholars however, strongly disapproved. The historian of Eastern European religious sects Yuri Stoyanov (2010:271-272) demonstrated how Çınar falsified original textual evidence by fabricating mistranslations that forced fragments of Alevi and Alevi-related terminology into primary source material related to Anatolian Paulicianism. Several Alevi scholars with a socialist outlook also did not hesitate to reject Çınar's alarming lack of accuracy, even calling it a 'scandal' (Aksüt et al. 2010), ironically reinforcing the view that the origins of Aleviness are not to be conceived of outside Islam.

This theory marketed by Çınar is akin to the one that designates the Alevis as the inheritors of religious groups that had suffered from sectarian persecutions in Europe from the 12th to the 14th century such as the Cathars, the Pataria movement, the Bogomils and the Anabaptists. Cathar ancestry for the Alevis is not completely new. This had already circulated after the publication in Turkish translation of a book for non-academic audiences about the Cathars, authored by Sean Martin, an Anglo-Irish filmmaker, who wrote about the Knights Templars, the Gnostics and Alchemists and made a documentary about the Druids. However, whereas the original book (Martin 2005) did not mention the Alevis even once,

Barış Baysal translated the title in Turkish as *Ortaçağ'da Avrupa'da bir Alevi Hareketi Katharlar* ('The Cathars: An Alevi Movement in Medieval Europe') (Martin 2009)[37], implying that the Cathars should be seen as a version of the Alevis in Medieval Europe. On the back cover of the book, a text indicated:

> The Cathars used to present themselves as the true Christians; they did not attend churches and preferred to perform their devotion at home. They had ecclesiastical classes different from the ones of other people and they followed the traces of their own 'Perfect Men' and Saints. They used to call their leaders 'dedes'. Among the Albigensians, women and men were equal and people of different gender could pray together to the point that women could also become saints and have a role among the ecclesiastical class. (My translation)

The marketing strategy for Sean Martin's book hinted at similarities of the Cathars to the understandings that an average Turkish reader might have of contemporary Alevis. A straightforward parallel is claimed: as the Cathars used to present themselves as the 'true' Christians, in the same way today's Alevis present themselves as the 'true' Muslims; as the Cathars used to choose not to go to church, in the same way today's Alevis prefer to worship in private houses rather than in mosques; the religious structures and spiritual rankings of the Cathars were different to those of the majority, and they respected distinctive holy persons and saints, which they used to call 'dedes' in exactly the same way as Alevis call their leaders today[38]. Finally, emphasizing gender equality among the Cathars is also used to stress the fact that women could pray next to men and pursue careers as priests, as is alleged to occur also among today's Alevis.

[37] Martin's and many of Çınar's book were published by the same house Kalkedon Yayınevi.

[38] The notion *of İnsan-i kamil*, roughtly translated as 'perfect man' in English is one of the tenets of Alevi belief. For a discussion of the concept in English language see Oktay's PhD thesis (2017).

In the attempt to draw alternative genealogies for the emergence of Aleviness, Çınar advanced the even bolder hypothesis that today's Alevis were the heirs of the Luwians, an ancient group living in South-West and Central Anatolia during the Bronze and Iron Ages (i.e. 2012:47-53). That this ancestry is traced back to a period much earlier than any Christian, Turkic and Islamic expansion in the Anatolian peninsula, certainly reinforces the claim of the Alevis to be the indigenous people of Anatolia. Despite the speculative quality of the hypothesis, based on free association rather than evidence (i.e. through an alleged centrality of dance in Luwian rituals and their resemblance to the Alevi *semah*s), the claim added yet more viewpoints to the already effervescent disputes about the etymology of the term *Alevi*. Most commonly the prominence of the figure of the prophet Ali in Alevi devotion is used to explain how the term indicates the 'descendants or followers of Ali'.[39] Sometimes, the term is associated with the Turkish word *alev*, meaning 'flame', with occasional reference to the centrality of the cult of fire in a Zoroastrian substratum of Alevi practices. Nonetheless, those who endorse a Luwian ancestry trace *alevi* back to *Luvi*, the term that is used in Turkish for 'Luwian' and that is alleged to mean 'people of light' in the Hittite language. *Alevi* would thus be a modern version of it and therefore the Alevis would not only be the indigenous people of Anatolia, but also the 'enlightened' ones.

As Stoyanov noticed (2010:272), Çınar's claims added other controversies to the ongoing debates about Alevi origins and identity, especially in popular and media outlets. At the core of these debates (developing among the Alevis in Turkey as well as among the diaspora communities in Europe, often with diverging results)

[39] In English language, the term *alid* refers to the dinasties descended from the İmam Ali.

is the question of whether Aleviness should be defined as an authentic Islamic tradition, a more secularised version of Islam or a faith altogether outside of Islam. As we have seen for the Köprülü paradigm, whilst Aleviness has been commonly traced back to a synthesis of Turkic Shamanism and heterodox Muslim cults, over the last decades several other frameworks have emerged to explain its origins. Even when obviously fabricated and not grounded in rigorous historical research, such asserted ethnic lineages are used in building or transgressing a sense of belonging and identity. An overview of the requests that the Alevis advance to the governments within whose national boundaries they live, should clarify how such articulations of ancestries and lineages are entrenched within wider socio-political and economic clashes.

2.5 Political requests and 'Alevi opening'

Even though not all researchers agree on defining the Alevis as a minority, it is reasonable to say that, throughout the different geopolitical contexts where they live, they never belong to the demographic majority, nor to the governing and financial elites.[40] As such, the Alevis always constitute a religious niche: a non-Sunni one in Turkey and a non-Christian one in Europe. In Turkey, the requests that they address to the State are usually articulated in opposition to the wealthy *Diyanet İşleri Bakanlığı*, the Ministry of Religious Affairs, the government organ that regulates state policies and allocates funding for confessional matters.[41] Because of its de facto endorsement of a Sunni-oriented national culture, the Alevis

[40] Scholars like Thierry Zarcone (2018:47) refrain from calling the Alevis a minority. Esra Özyürek (2009:244-247) convincingly discussed the controversies over the use of the term between Turkish and European legal frameworks.

[41] Özyürek (2009:237) stated that in 2009 this had a larger budget than many other ministries, approximately one billion dollars.

perceive the Diyanet to be incompatible with the officially secular state. Nonetheless, depending on political and economic positioning, attitudes towards the Diyanet can vary greatly. For instance, some groups, such as the *Cem Vakfı*, directed by the lawyer İzzettin Doğan, may promote collaboration with it because of their understanding of Aleviness as a Turkish interpretation of Islam; other associations that frame Alevism more within a socialist resistance struggle, such as the *Pir Sultan Abdal Derneği*, rather than advancing specific requests, may call for its complete abolition or for the establishment of a separate Ministry with an independent budget devoted only to Alevi affairs (Zarcone 2018:56). These plural and fragmented views remain rather dislocated from one another, contributing to the difficulty the Alevis have in having a single voice vis-à-vis the government. Despite the dislocated character of these requests, one of the recurring and crucial areas of contention is education. For instance, the Alevis call for an end to compulsory religious classes in public schools. In fact, since the military coup of 1980, these classes continued to teach Sunni ethics and observances to younger generations of Turkish citizens belonging to all sorts of religious factions (i.e. see Zarcone 2018:54). Also, the Alevis often call for justice and transparency about obscure spots in their grim recent history, for instance disclosing the official archival material pertaining to the massacres in Dersim 1938 and Karahmanmaraş in 1978.[42]

A more tangible instance of the same demand for justice is the call for recognition and subsidising of specific sites, such as religious centres, lodges and museums. Principally, the Alevis demand the recognition of their worship places,

[42] For instance, this point is articulated on the website of the British Alevi Federation (2019).

the *cemevi*, not only as cultural centres, but also as religious ones. As Şahin reminds (2005: 472) the term *cemevi*, which literally means 'the house of the Cem', is a recent invention that since the 1990s started to reflect a newly arranged spatial-symbolic custom which emerged with the migration of a large number of Alevi groups from rural areas of Turkey to urban environments in Western Turkey and abroad. Hence, the Alevis want the Diyanet to allocate the cemevis the same kind of financial support that is given to Sunni mosques. Recognition for the cemevis as religious centres is also conveyed through their plea for an end to the state-enforced construction of mosques in villages and urban neighbourhoods that are mostly populated by the Alevis, plans which are perceived as part of a strategy to assimilate them into Sunnism. Furthermore, the Alevis often re-claim ownership of those lodges and shrines (mostly Bektaşi) which were abolished and expropriated through the secular policies inaugurated in 1925 after the establishment of the Republic. In fact, some of these centres were reopened as cultural museums during the 1960s (for instance Haci Bektaş Museum in Hacıbektaş, Kırşehir) and are now visited as part of pilgrimages. However, many Alevis reject being forced to pay for accessing and worshiping at these sites.[43]

Whereas Alevis may oppose the framing of some of these shrines and lodges as museums, they may demand the 'museification' of other buildings of paramount symbolic importance within their recent history of struggle. This is the case of the *Madımak Hotel* in the city of Sivas, a building that state authorities converted into a 'Science and Culture Centre' in Spring 2011 despite the ongoing Alevi demands for it to become a 'Museum of Shame' or 'Museum of Deterrence'.

[43] See for instance this point as articulated on the website of the British Alevi Federation (2019).

Such a demand is part of the plea for justice for the several episodes of discrimination and slaughter which Alevis suffered during recent decades, of which the event of Sivas is emblematic. For its re-emergence as a locale of memorialization and contestation throughout Alevi contemporary experiences, the reader will learn more about this event in the following section of this chapter.

Paradoxically, these years also saw the government's promotion of a process of 'opening' to the Alevis (*Alevi Açılım*), which developed from 2009 on after pressure from the EU. Thierry Zarcone (2018) provided a short summary of the ambiguities in this process, starting with refusals to recognise a special status for the Alevis as a 'minority'. In a Turkish context dominated by Sunni and nationalist rhetoric, the Alevis tended to reject such a framing because of the negative association of the term with religious groups long seen as foreigners or internal enemies of the state, such as the Jews and the Christians; in fact, such a framing would be detrimental to their more urgent need of 'fitting in' within the national landscape. It is however the government which obstructed such recognition because of its understanding of Aleviness as a form of piety which, although defective, is still located within Islam rather than outside it. This 'opening' resulted in a series of tactics that, rather than obscuring the very existence of the Alevis as in the past, now started to aim at 'integrating' their presence in the public and cultural sphere, if not actually promoting it. Since these tactics privilege those elements in Aleviness that are closer to Sunni Islam, often framing it as a Sufi style of association (*tarikat*)[44], the Alevis often reject them as attempts at 'Sunnification'

[44] Zarcone (2018:58-59) summarized these attempts to domesticate Aleviness as moving towards what he termed 'Shiitization' or 'Bektashization'. The first process implies a framing of Aleviness within Duodeciman Shiism and is accompanied by a request for the Alevis to refrain from deifyingn the figure of Ali or cultivate antinomian tendencies, or the encouraging of their observance of the 5 Islamic pillars. The second process forces the

or 'domestication'[45]. The publication during the mid-2000s of ten volumes of religious 'Alevi-Bektashi classics' by the Diyanet is an example of this new trend where the government re-positions itself not only as a benevolent agent that recognizes the existence of the Alevis, but one that also sponsors their knowledge (Massicard 2013:104; Weinek 2014:97).

Efforts for 'folklorization', that is to de-sacralise Alevi practices and frame them as part of national folklore, is another policy inherited from the nationalist Republican past. An example of this trend is the presentation in public schoolbook texts of the *ayn-i cem* rituals as cultural gatherings which are emblematic of Anatolian traditional lifestyles, or of the *semah* as a folk dance, similar to the *zeybek* or the *horon*, thus framing these phenomena as cultural occurrences which have little to do with religious matters. The inscription in 2010 of the *semah* on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity is certainly part of this trend. As sociologist Bahar Aykan pointed out (2012), despite encouraging Alevi public visibility, this heritage-making process did not contribute to a more direct Alevi participation to public life and their socio-legal emancipation. Rather, the process was tempered with subtle falsifications dominated by the nationalist concerns of the ruling party (AKP) in what Aykan calls 'politics of misrecognition'. Surprisingly, through fieldwork Aykan found out that whereas the official UNESCO nomination files seemed to suggest that the heritagization process for the *semah* was conducted with the collaboration and support of the Alevi-Bektaşi community, not all of the respondents whose names and signatures

Alevis to all conflate within the Bektaşi order, in a process similar to the one that led to the flourishing of this confraternity during the XVI century (see 2.2).

[45] For instance, Weinek (2014) framed the governing of Alevi Cultural Heritage in Turkey as oscillating between recognition, surveillance and a 'domestication' of diversity.

were present on some of these official documents were aware of the fact (Aykan 2012: 178-191). As emerges in her study, the more these Alevi representatives are faced with heritagization prospects driven by strongly Sunni biased policies, the more they accentuate the strict reading of the *semah* as worship. As many claim, in the same way as the *namaz*, the Islamic prayer in the mosque, is significant for the Sunni devout, the *semah* is significant for the Alevi. The acclamation of the *semah* as heritage came however decades after it started to be performed as a folkloric dance on the public stage more than in the sole context of the *ayn-i cem* rituals (Öztürkmen 2005). As discussed in the introduction, especially in Turkey, many Alevis would still reject the characterization of *semah* as dance as this is entangled in key processes of ethnic, religious and national identity formation and attribution that notably participate also to the constituency of Islam, despite a marginal viewpoint.

2.6 Remembrance of Alevi massacres: Sivas 1993

The events that occurred in the Eastern city of Sivas on the 2nd of July 1993 possibly marked the most commonly evoked landmark in Alevi contemporary experiences. These have been commonly represented as a 'massacre', 'pogrom', 'slaughter', or at the very least as 'dramatic occurrences' (Aykan 2012:159-162; Köse 2009:132-135, Poyraz 2005:3; Şahin 2005:475-467; Shankland and Çetin 2005:1-2; Van Bruinessen 1996:9; Zeidan 1999:78, among others). On that date, a radical Islamist mob set fire to the *Madımak Hotel* in the city centre where a conference to commemorate the 16th century poet Pir Sultan Abdal was happening. Several Alevi and non-Alevi intellectuals and artists were participating in the event. The target of the attack was Aziz Nesin, a well-known atheist writer

who had recently announced his forthcoming publication of a Turkish translation of Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses*. The Islamists perceived Nesin's declaration and presence in the city as a provocation and were angry that the festival was taking place in the centre of Sivas, a Sunni-majority city, rather than in a smaller Alevi village in the region as it had been in the past. Its closeness made it possible to attack the hotel just after performing their Friday prayers in the nearby mosque. Whereas local authorities and the police did not interfere to stop the aggressors and Nesin managed to escape and survive, thirty-five other attendees, as well as two of the aggressors, died in the fire. Among them were intellectuals, musicians, artists and *semahcı*s. The majority of the victims were under 25 years old and some of them, like the poet Metin Altıok or the musicians Nesimi Çimen, Hasret Gültekin and Muhlis Akarsu, enjoyed a certain fame among the wider Turkish-speaking public because of their literary and musical accomplishments. Carina Cuanna Thuijs, a Dutch student of Anthropology who was attending the festival as part of her fieldwork research for a degree at the University of Leiden in the Netherlands, also perished.[46]

The events in Sivas were not unusual as deadly assaults against the Alevis had occurred in the past. In fact, during the late seventies and eighties many other attacks were carried out in the cities of Malatya (April 1978), again in Sivas (September 1978), in Kahranmaraş (often shortened as 'Maraş massacre', December 1978)[47], in Hatay (January 1980) and in Çorum (July 1980). As in these

[46] Especially see Van Bruinessen 1996:9. The story of this student is at the center of the movie *Madımak. Carina'nın günluğü* (lit. 'Madımak. Carina's Diary') by director Ulaş Bahadir, first distributed in September 2015.

[47] Sinclair-Webb (2003) and Sökefeld (2008:51-52) discussed the centrality of this event for the politicization of Alevi identity in Germany. In this occasion 'activists of the ultra-right and nationalist MHP attacked housed and shops of Alevis in Maraş, killing more than one hundred persons and leaving many more wounded' (Sökefeld 2008:51). Sökefeld remarked how the 'Maraş massacre' is especially significant for the transnational

other episodes, the one in Sivas confirms local interpretations of the recent past. It is seen as yet another example of ancient religious schisms within Turkish Islam and the violent struggles to assert supremacy over what Islam is and what faction should lead the Muslim community. Nonetheless, the attack on the Madımak Hotel differs from the others because this time the primary targets were intellectuals and artists.[48]

This event contributed to shifting the field of Alevi struggles towards embodied and cultural politics, as my case studies will demonstrate. It is worth noting how some of the narratives that emerged just after the massacre recount that the victims died in the flames as they were turning the *semah* (i.e. Yıldırım 1993), a detail which had a profound impact on my own research on the *semah* and this thesis. Indeed, the fact that several young *semahcı*s died in the fire not only provoked my research on ethical terms (as already discussed in the Introduction), but also raised compelling questions about the shifting role that learning about and representing the *semah* acquired in public domains, as I will elaborate in the next chapter.

Whereas both Alevis and non-Alevis in Turkey may often remember the event as one of the grimmest episodes in Turkish contemporary history, from the Alevi perspective the event provoked a hopelessness that persists into the present. Kristina Kehl-Bodrogi's discussion (2016) of how the 'event of Sivas' (*Sivas olayı*)

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politicization of the 'Alevi' category on ethnic lines. The event inaugurated a shift for many Alevi activists, especially in a German context, to start calling attention to their particularistic stance rather than conflating their energies into left-wing organizations and class solidarity (Sökefeld 2008: 51-52). The British Alevi Federation remarks how the Maraş episode was 'the most significant one', as it determined the migration of many inhabitants of this area to flee, often abroad. In fact, a vast number of the Alevis currently living in the UK are coming from Maraş.

[48] Van Bruinessen (1996:9) raises a similar point.

was evaluated and interpreted in different ways by different actors illustrates such a perception. Whereas radical Islamist media did not hide their satisfaction at the acts of violence, more moderate religious and right-wing voices, including government circles and mainstream TV channels, distanced themselves from such acts continuing to justify them as a legitimate response to the provocation that Nesim had caused. Furthermore, liberal and democrat circles saw the event as an attack on the secularism of the state rather than as a 'denominational conflict' (*mezhep çatışması*) between Sunnis and Alevis. Kehl-Bodrogi remarks that most of the Alevis did not doubt that the events were specifically targeted against them, and that Nesim served merely as a pretence to mask the goal of eliminating their existence in an unfriendly national environment. More than the other massacres, Alevi narratives rely on Sivas as a reminder of their enduring struggles for survival. Martin Sökefeld and Susanne Schwalgin (2000:24-25) argued that the episode of Sivas retrospectively became the paradigmatic illustration of a victim discourse that produced and re-produced the myth of a historically continuous Alevi community. Such a victim discourse shaped a communal identity by bringing together several substantially diverse Alevi groups in Turkey[49] and establishing a historical continuity. Accordingly, selective and partial historical references were used to connect the event of Sivas to the battle of Kerbela and the persecution of the Kızılbaş under Sultan Selim Yavuz, and even further clashes that occurred in the Gazi district of Istanbul in 1995.

[49] Interestingly, Yildiz and Verkuyten (2011) remarked how the process of shaping a coherent social identity funded on a shared victimhood started mainly among the Alevis in Europe, and became an inclusive referent to bring together not only several substantially diverse Alevi groups in Turkey, but more generally any other aggrieved and oppressed group.

Every year demonstrations are held to remember the victims of Sivas and to demand that the site be turned into a 'museum of deterrence' (*ibret müzesi*) or of 'museum of shame' (*utanç müzesi*), a request which has never been acceded to. When I participated in the demonstration in Sivas in 2011, the legally authorized march was suppressed by police's teargas bombs, confirming that the disputes were far from settled and that participation in events which assert an Alevi public identity may easily result in bodily distress and maltreatment, a point I will come back to in the next chapter. Like me, Eray Çaylı attended the demonstrations for the commemorations in 2011, and then again, a year later as part of his research on architectural memorialization in contemporary Turkey. Çaylı described the Madimak Hotel as one of 'Turkey's sites of atrocity', unpacking the legal and juridical shortcomings in attempts to convert them into museums (Çaylı 2014). Even more interesting is how, in a more recent article (2018) Çaylı re-assessed this fieldwork experience to unpack the 'conspiratorial thinking' that the spatial restrictions imposed during the commemorative events encouraged among the protesters and the wider public. Even without discussion of how the protesting and commemorative events kinetically unfolded, the attention that Çaylı paid to the dynamics of physical restrictions is remarkable, and points to the scarcity of studies that consider embodied and kinetic aspects in crucial events in which contemporary Alevism gets shaped.

Since the 1990s, the politicization of the Alevi identity that followed the grim events of which Sivas constitutes the most remarkable, was achieved and enhanced primarily through recurring re-enactments and new commemorative rituals. For instance, Kristina Kehl-Bodrogi remarked how after Sivas, the 'myth of

Kerbela' was evoked to reinforce communal cohesion and to legitimize the political claims for 'recognition' of their specific identity. She explained:

> Memorials and demonstrations are held on the day of the tragedy in Turkey and in the European diaspora; moments of silence to remember the 'martyrs of Sivas' (*Sivas şehitleri*) open association meetings, conferences and the like; black-edged photos of the thirty seven victims of Sivas are hung in the lounges of associations and displayed on their web pages, and Alevi periodicals dedicate special issues to Sivas. (Kehl-Bodrogi 2016:53)

The embodied and kinetic dimension in such processes of contemporary Alevi-making is however something that remained rather invisible or insufficiently highlighted in the academic literature. This is certainly revealed by the limitations which characterize how the *semah*s have been approached in scholarly literature. It is, for instance, noteworthy that the practice inspired several social scientists to discuss it as a metaphor to address larger social issues, but these did not normally discuss how Alevis learn to perform the *semah*s, nor they engaged in bodily learning to perform the *semah*s themselves. An exception is Irene Markussen's PhD thesis (2012) where the author's participation in *semah* classes at the Şahkulu Sultan Derneği in Istanbul provides insights into bodily perceptions during and after the fieldwork moment. Scholars have rarely brought processes of bodily learning to the fore of academic reflection, regardless of how relevant they may have been to entering the field of contemporary Alevi experiences.

The episode of Sivas is in important ways related to at least three crucial factors. These are: the crystallization of a victimhood and martyrdom discourse, the politicization of Aleviness at an embodied level, and the enhancement of performing artistry for memorializing purposes. The events of Sivas remain a catalyst for such processes and may often be re-activated in resonance to other grim episodes which may be unconnected to the Alevi cause and Alevi demands

for identity recognition. An example from my personal involvement in the life of the Alevi community in London between 2015 and 2017, may serve to illustrate this point. This occurred in July 2017, when the young and talented Alevi singer Çiğdem Aslan published a post on her public Facebook profile, in which she dedicated her interpretation of a song composed by Nesimi Çimen to the victims who perished in Sivas, among whom was Çimen himself. The singer also established a commemorative nexus to share the grief for those who died into a more cogent and recent tragic incident. She wrote:

> Today after a gig, on the way back to London we drove past the Grenfell Tower which was heart-breaking: the sight of the completely burnt down building will remain with me forever just like the image of the Madimak Hotel which was set alight 24 years ago by a huge crowd of Islamic extremists attacking an Alevi cultural festival. We watched it on the television as it happened with despair and anger. We will never forget how the government did nothing to stop those murderers. 35 people including many artists, poets, writers, musicians like Nesimi Cimen were among those killed. This is to keep their memories alive. (Aslan 2017)

Speaking for many, the singer associated seeing the grim tragedy that Londoners experienced after the fire in the Grenfell Tower flats in West London in June 2017 with the fire at the Madımak Hotel more than 20 years before, pointing to the inability of governments to prevent or stop the deaths. Re-activating a memory of struggle against social injustice and mistreatment, the reference establishes a ‘narrative home’ through collective commemoration. Individual experience and witnessing are thus brought into a meaningful shape, obeying a memorializing principle which constitutes a critical stance against dominant discourses and practices.

2.7 ‘Alevitizing’ dissent between 2014 and 2018

Throughout the many episodes of violence that they experience daily in Turkey, the Alevis see re-enacted the preservation of their subordinate status. To understand how the Alevi category is ordinarily constructed is however revealing of the strategies through which over recent years the Alevis were forced to keep on embodying a subaltern condition and of how political dissent has been ‘alevitized’ by the government, that is, represented as specifically Alevi. Even though it is too early to assess the consequences, some of the current developments should be referred to here since they constitute the primary context in which fieldwork was conducted, and the historical horizon where the analysis of Alevi staged adaptations get their meaning.

Recourse to the verb ‘alevitize’ is useful to unpack such developments for a series of reasons which should become evident. In fact, its recent emergence informs the forms through which processes of ethnic differentiation have been articulated. This was aptly used for the first time by the Alevi historian Ayfer Karakaya-Stump (2014) to comment on the AKP government’s attempts to ethnicize as “Alevi phenomena” all those instances of political dissent that emerged during the wave of protests starting in June 2013 in the central Gezi Park in Istanbul. The Gezi protests and their aftermath, both in Turkey and abroad, constitute one of the crucial historical horizons upon which the staged productions I will analyse have often been conceived or re-conceived, as well as the underlying historical moment when my research was conducted. For this reason, some further details of this wave of protests and the participation of the Alevis in them need to be provided.

The media and scholars use ‘Gezi Park protests’ to indicate the protests that spread throughout Turkey over Summer 2013, marking yet another break through in Turkish contemporary history (i.e. David and Toktamış 2015; Gambetti 2016; Koç and Aksu 2015; Öztürkmen 2014, among others). The protests marked the emergence of a novel public collective force capable of mobilizing in creative ways to react against an increasingly authoritarian regime and irresponsible speculative investment. Through multifaceted visual and performative strategies (i.e. Bayraktar 2017; Kuryel 2015; Öztürkmen 2014; Gümüştekin 2015; Walton 2015; Yanik 2015, among others), many citizens assembled to halt the construction projects that threatened to destroy one of the few green areas at the heart of Istanbul’s historical and economic centre. In addition to Alevis, diverse counter-hegemonic groups that had not allied in the past gathered on the streets. They included: environmentalists fighting the government’s neoliberal policies and speculative investments (such as the state-led hydroelectric power plant projects), anti-capitalist Muslims, socialists, liberals, anti-Islamists, educated middle-class people and blue-collar workers, LGBT citizens, members of ethnic, linguistic or religious minorities (such as Kurds, Jews, Armenians, Laz etc.) and professional and less well-known artists. Despite the escalation of authoritarianism and the recourse to military force which became the norm over the following months, the experience remains a precious lesson remembered by all those who, together, resisted the authoritarian drift of the government. In the words of the sociologist Nilüfer Göle, all these actors ‘rehearsed together new forms of citizenship’ (Göle 2013:14).

Even though the protests involved people from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds, the authorities and state-supported media did not hesitate to depict

all the protestors as Alevi. Karakaya-Stump (2014) drew attention to the fact that official figures asserted that 78 per cent of those arrested during the protests were Alevis. The figure is controversial since the Turkish census does not recognize 'Alevi' as a social category and it is not possible to be identified as such on Turkish ID cards. All those who were murdered during the security forces' repression of the protests were Alevis[50] (fig. 4), an important factor which still does not make it an Alevi uprising. This is because most of the Alevis did not take part as a politically organised collective with a precise Alevi agenda in mind and their deaths happened outside the epicentres of the protests, in Alevi neighbourhoods not normally visible to the media. As Karakaya-Stump pointed out, such episodes reveal the ability of the state apparatus to 'calibrate the scale of its violence according to its targets' (*ibid.*), by framing protest in terms of irresponsible sectarian politics. The sociologist Nil Mutluer remarked how after the protests, in Alevi neighbourhoods throughout Turkey (such as Güzeltepe and Narlıdere in Izmir, Tuzluçayır in Ankara, Gazi, Okmeydanı and Nurtepe in İstanbul, Armutlu in Antakya, Paşaköşkü in Malatya) the disproportionate and systematic recourse to police violence generated 'a melancholic feeling of desolation and a justified feeling of indignation' (2016: 188-189). Mutluer also remarked how, whereas police violence in these areas was repeatedly justified by the alleged affiliation of youngsters living there to

[50] These are: Abdullah Cömert, Mehmet Ayvalıtaş, Ali İsmail Korkmaz, Berkin Elvan, Ethem Sarısülük, Medeni Yıldırım, Ahmet Atakan, Hasan Ferit Gedik. Among them the youngest is Berkin Elvan, a 15 years old boy who was hit by a tear-gas canister while on his daily walk to buy bread and who finally died in March 2014 after a nine months long coma. His loss was saluted by a spontaneous communal walk in which thousands of people participated by getting out on the streets with a loaf of bread in their hands. In the following months, Berkin's face quickly became one of the most powerful symbols for the dissenters. Emphasizing his virtuosity and innocence, he also started to be remembered as a *şehit*, that is as a religious martyr in Islamic terms. Gruber (2017a; 2017b) discusses how the protestors who died during the clashes were claimed as 'Gezi martyrs' (lit. *Gezi şehitleri*) and their visual memorialization.

illegal armed groups and often presented as ‘terrorists’ in the media, such persecutory tones and policies ironically turned these neighbourhoods into fertile ground for the emergence of such armed forms of militantism (ibid.).

Figure 4. Faruk Tarınç's portrayal of the Alevi citizens killed during the Gezi protests while marching together as a cheerful group. Source: Bilgehan and Tarinç 2014.

The sense of social persecution affected the Alevis also because of their exposure to insecurity in the workplace. A crucial incident in 2014 exposed how often marginality that is articulated on ethnic lines intersects with working class precarity and danger. Many of the 301 workers who lost their life on the 13th of May during a disaster in a coalmine near the town of Soma in the district of Balıkhesir in Western Turkey were Alevis. The tragedy, reported to be the worst mine disaster in Turkish history, occurred just weeks after the Grand National Assembly of Turkey had rejected the requests of the CHP (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, lit. 'Republican People's Party') for investigations about the poor safety conditions in

the mine, which mineworkers had been protesting about over months (i.e. Radikal 2014). A new wave of demonstrations and repression by security forces shook Turkey after the disaster, with evidence emerging of the large corporate interests and corruption of the AKP government, with the president belittling the catastrophe and inviting people to pray rather than protest. Columnist Pınar Tremblay (2014) reported how immediately after the disaster the Diyanet deployed many imams to the area, in numbers that exceeded those of the deaths. This enforcement of authoritarianism on religious lines was seen by the communities living in the several Alevi villages in the area, like the town of Elmadere, as yet another provocation by the government (Saraç 2014). Many journalists wrote about the lack of any official visit nor support from the state, despite these towns being those most affected by the deaths (Christie-Millen 2014).[51]

State violence increased during the summer and autumn of 2015 after the general elections in June resulted in losses by the two main parties in the Parliament, the AKP and the CHP, while at the same time the ultra-nationalist MHP (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, lit. 'Nationalist Movement Party) and the newly established democratic pro-Kurdish HDP (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi*, lit. 'Peoples' Democratic Party') gained a larger percentage of votes. Given the strongly majoritarian electoral system, the plural character of the result created political instability which led to the announcement of new elections at the beginning of November. Together with the civil and international warfare in neighbouring Syria and a mounting refugee crisis all over the Mediterranean and Europe, during

[51] A booklet published one year later to the disaster by the Hünkar Hacı Bektaş Veli Vakfı (Koçak 2015) collected the speeches held by some Alevi representatives and religious figures during a Cem held in the town of Kınık in occasion of the funerals of the deaths.

this period the situation in Turkey became even more violent. Many civilians, mostly Alevis, died during the attacks that occurred in the towns of Soruç, Çizre, Silvan, as well as in the Gazi district of Istanbul and during what became one of the deadliest attacks of its kind in Turkish contemporary history. This occurred on the 10th October next to the capital city's central train station where more than a hundred civilians lost their lives after two bombs were detonated during a demonstration calling for peace and an end to the bombings in the Kurdish and South-Eastern parts of the country. It is also during this period that, in the months between June and October, many religious events, like the Munzur Festival in the city of Tunceli-Dersim, the epicentre of an imaginary Alevi state, were cancelled for security reasons.

Such developments manifested a newly authoritarian turn by the Turkish government and escalated into a which hunt following on a failed coup attempt on July 15, 2016 for which supporters of the exiled preacher Fetullah Gülen were blamed. The crackdown resulted in the dismissal of more than 100,000 public employers from their jobs and the arrest of about 40,000 people, especially in the police, army, judiciary, primary and higher education, as well as in journalism and the art sector (i.e. see Girard et al. 2018). Such numbers keep on increasing, with the repression of any kind of pluralism in Turkey becoming more frequent.[52] Organisations such as Amnesty International called attention to the alarming

[52] Many evoked the assassination in 2007 of journalist Hrant Dink as a crucial episode anticipating the current political repression of any attempt to imagine a more pluralist Turkey. Together with a group of other journalists, in April 1996 Dink founded Agos, the first newspaper since the establishment of the Republic to be published both in Turkish and Armenian. After the assassination of Dink in 2007, the editorial policy of Agos continues to foster attention to democratization, minority rights and pluralism in Turkey. For a touching portrayal of Hrant Dink and of his pioneering role in the transformation of activist discourse in Turkey, see Selek (2015:59-75).

situation of human rights and denounced the disproportionate recourse to police violence on the streets and to torture in prisons, the number of extrajudicial executions and arbitrary terrorism charges,[53] as well as the ambivalent position of country's immigration policies.[54] In February 2018, during a speech at the Geneva Summit for Human Rights and Democracy, the author Aslı Erdoğan, who in 2016 was imprisoned for more than four months accused of 'destroying the unity of the state' because of her advisory position to the legal pro-Kurdish journal *Özgür Gündem*, did not hesitate to compare present day Turkey to a big 'concentration camp' (Stockholm Center for Freedom 2017). Minority Rights Group International (2018) reported how many of the journalists and media outlets affected by this repressive climate were those broadcasting and publishing about Alevi culture, and attempts at vandalizing or setting fire to Alevi houses or *cemevi*s happen frequently. For instance, the organisation reports that in November 2017, Alevi leaders expressed concern when 13 houses were daubed with red crosses in the eastern province of Malatya.

One of the developments that Turkish society has undergone especially since 2014 is the obstruction of Alevi funerals. The *Diyanet* seem to have encouraged Alevi *dede*s to use Arabic as a language for the liturgies, a practice which is foreign to Alevi customs.[55] However, attacks on Alevi funerals have

[53] The killing of the human rights defender and lawyer Tahir Elçi in the city centre of Diyarbakır, or the arrest of Can Dündar, director of the daily *Cumhuriyet*, are exemplary cases. Together with his colleague Erdem Gül, Dündar was charged of espionage and collaboration with terrorist organizations after having published a report on the arms trafficking links between the MIT – the Turkish secret services – and war militants in Syria.

[54] In 2015 Turkey was hosting more two million refugees from Syria, even though without meeting any lawful standards in their reception.

[55] For instance, in 2015, an Alevi friend living in İstanbul lamented how her family could not find the determination to oppose the celebration of her father's funeral according to his wishes; part of the service was conducted in Arabic, a language that none of the family members could understand, and the playing of the bağlama was hindered by the appointed religious officer.

acquired a more systematic character. Already during the days of the Gezi protests, security forces in Ankara attacked and blocked the funerals of Ethem Sarısülük, killed by the police during the clashes (i.e. Lee et al. 2013; Hardy 2014). In May 2014, despite media channels closer to the government reporting the opposite, many lamented how institutional figures did not participate in the funerals in the Alevi villages decimated after the Soma mine disaster (i.e. Söylemez 2014). A week later in Istanbul, a funeral procession in the Alevi Okmeydanı neighbourhood was attacked by the police, and a stray bullet killed a man, Uğur Kurt, whose funeral a few days later became yet another site of clashes (Letsch 2014). These obstructions are ongoing: in September 2017 in Ankara, a fascist mob attacked the funeral of the mother of Ayşel Tuğluk, deputy chair of the HDP party. Like many other HDP members, Tuğluk is currently in jail on terrorist charges, however she received permission to leave prison to attend her mother's funeral. After the mob attacked the service, the family decided to exhume the body and take it to their native Tunceli – Dersim for reburial because they feared that the grave would be attacked again in the future (Hurtas 2017).

2.8 Alevi diasporas and cosmopolitanism

In her monograph about Germans and Turkish migrants in Germany, anthropologist Ruth Mandel recounted how in the 1980s a German-based Alevi socialist group started promoting the establishment of an independent "Alevistan", a state of the Alevis, in the south-eastern part of Turkey. Though such a project appealed to a limited number of people and was never realized, the Turkish state

often repeated this discourse presenting it as a national security threat.[56] Since the Alevis, like the Kurds, never lived in a land of their own, Mandel remarked that they are 'painfully aware of their critical role within the cartography of power […]' (2008:272–273). As we have observed earlier in this chapter, the lack of an Alevi homeland also meant the Alevis were largely excluded from official history. In the absence of an independent state, they embarked on a series of migrations and displacements which have been decisive in the articulation of their own histories and struggles. Also because of their marginal position in Turkey, such migrations were more urgent for them than they were for the Sunnis.

In line with the broader scope of this thesis of discussing staged adaptation of Alevi rituals in trans-national contexts, here I shall briefly summarize issues related to Alevi demographic movements beyond the borders of Turkey. Several key studies have focused specifically on issues related to the Alevi transnational 'struggle for recognition' (Sökefeld 2008) and re-territorialisation (Massicard 2013) in Germany and transnationally. Researching transnational Alevi communities in Berlin, Vienna and Istanbul, the anthropologist Esra Özyürek (2009) has advanced insightful claims on debates regarding the 'lack of integration' or 'demand for recognition' of Muslim identities in Europe. Özyürek sharply exposed how, although policy makers and public intellectuals in Europe often frame the presence of Muslim identities in Europe as carriers of issues that originate elsewhere, self-understandings and political claims of European Muslims are largely fabricated in Europe rather than being imported from other countries with a Muslim majority. On

[56] I wish to thanks Çiçek İlengiz for bringing my attention to this point after my presentation during the 2nd Doktoranden workshop on Alevi Studies, hosted in June 2018 by the Alevi Bildungswerk 'Şah İbrahim Veli' e. V. in Ravensburg.

the countrary, the demands that European Muslims formulate within European legal frameworks become often transplanted elsewhere. In her words:

> Thus it is the political, legal, and social context of the post-Cold War European Union and the unique conditions of individual European countries that shape the way Muslim communities define themselves in that sociopolitical geography. These new identities that come into being at the core of Europe transform the debates and definitions of Islam in the Muslim-majority peripheries of Europe rather than vice versa. (Özyürek 2009:233)

Exposing the different legal frameworks within which Alevi demands for recognition and integration are articulated in Europe and in Turkey, Özyürek thus reassess the centre-periphery dynamics in the emergence of transnational Alevism.

Based on more than thirty-years of ethnographic research on Turkish challenges to German citizenship, Ruth Mandel's engaging monograph (2008) shares a concern similar to that of Özyürek in reassessing naturalized understanding of centre-periphery dynamics and Alevi transnational displacement. Mandel's research subtly debunks the ambiguities and challenges that Alevi expressions of identity expose in a transnational landscape. The richness of Mandel's monograph is moulded through an acute attitude to self-reflective exploration (such as how her familiar and cultural background made her sensitive to the resonance of Turkish migrants with problematic past German encounters with Jewish 'others'), as well as through a sensitivity to artistic and literary works. Paying attention to socio-political demands as well as to emerging cultural forms, Mandel's monography can be read to apprise how, despite still territorially and linguistically anchored, waves of transnational migrations made Alevi identities cosmopolitan at their very core. Such cosmopolitanism springs out of their skill in spreading over national borders and cultural gaps, and in subverting any simplified

mapping of the centre-periphery dichotomies in the migratory cycles (especially, see Mandel 2008:232-247).

Although this thesis addresses the German context only in passing, Germany is certainly a topical referent in any discussion of the Alevi diaspora. Together with a general trend of relocation from Eastern to Western Turkey, since the 1960s Alevi migration started to be oriented also abroad, especially toward Belgium, the Netherlands, France, Switzerland and Great Britain. Nonetheless, it is mostly Germany, whose booming economy suffered from an acute labour scarcity, that started recruiting workers in the poorest regions of Europe, especially in the South and South East, as well as in Turkey. After the oil crisis of 1972 however, the European economic recession forced regular recruitment in Turkey to stop, even though illegal immigration continued, often resulting in low-paid work and little or no social security (Zürcher 1993:270-271). In Germany, these migrant workers were labelled *gastarbeiter* (German for 'guest-worker'), a term which highlights the ambiguity and precariousness of their displaced condition and the hierarchical relations of domination and subordination reflected in both components of the compound.[57] The Turkish migration to Germany constitutes however a much more complex challenge to notions of citizenship that are still bound to a fixed idea of the nation-state. It provided a model for the imagination of subaltern identities and communities which continuously tried to re-negotiate what it meant to live in that space in-between that is not only *Germanness* and not only *Turkishness*. These challenges flourished in artistic and literary works that surpassed strict distinctions between languages and national belongings. Their creative expressions captured the deracination and sadness concealed within

[57] For a broader discussion of the term see Mandel 2008:55-58.

exilic existences, as revealed in the tropes of a *gurbet* condition, a Turkish term referring to a state of homesickness and melancholic longing for that place where one truly belongs, being it one's birth's village, region or nation (Mandel 2008:233-235).

At present, Germany remains the country hosting the largest number of Alevi migrants, and it is here that most studies of the Alevi diaspora, as well as more generally on Aleviness and Alevism, have been conducted. As Mandel explored, both before and after the fall of the Berlin wall, the articulations of Alevism as a minoritarian belonging within the larger Turkish community in Germany provided an ideal prism for understanding cultural productivity and creativity brought about demographic mobility. Such creativity demonstrated the way the relocation of the rural Alevis to the cities, both in Turkey as well as in Europe, enforced an adaptation of their rituals. As 'an expression of mimetic self-creation and self-affirmation' (2008:285), Mandel commented on the polysemic character of the *cem* rituals in Berlin and persuasively showed how, in this new political context, their historical meanings were reinterpreted in different ways. At times these developed as revolutionary practices challenging class distinctions and capitalism, if not biased understandings of Islam and gender inequalities therein; other times they became incubators of ethno-national reactionary ideologies in the struggle to survive against socio-economic uncertainties (ibid.). The exilic condition proved to be fertile soil for remarkable transformations of what Aleviness is beyond the religious sphere and its articulation in a wider public framework. Predicting what 'Alevi futures' may resemble in such contexts, Mandel wrote:

> Alevilik as it has existed for the last several centuries, marked by practices that are secretive, underground, dissimulating, and oppositional, may

> indeed be nearing obsolescence, replaced by a transformed, public, politicized, folklorized, popularized and ever-splintering iteration of Alevilik that continually finds ways to re-express itself. (2008:293)

In 1989, the publication by the Hamburg Alevi Association of an 'Alevi manifesto' was a crucial turning point in this shift from secrecy to visibility and politicization. The document marked a very important step in the public recognition of Aleviness as a self-contained faith and culture, but still emphasizing its grounding in Islam. With an urgent tone, the manifesto, written by Alevi and Sunni intellectuals and published one year later in *Cumhuriyet*[58], demanded equal representation and opportunities in education, media visibility and money allocation for holding religious services (Özyürek 2009:128).

The associative contexts of the diaspora became an important incubator for transmitting and debating Alevi knowledge, not only in terms of ritual liturgies, but also in political, educational, and cultural matters. The ethnomusicologist Martin Greve has examined extensively the music making of Turkish migrants in Germany and their exchanges with an 'imaginary' Turkish homeland (*Hayali Türkiye*), paying particular attention to the music produced by the Alevis, both within and beyond the religious context (especially, 2006:272-304). The changed cultural landscape in Germany created opportunities and expectations among Alevi musicians, who often constructed a career between the religious and the professional milieux. Some of them, such as Arif Sağ and Mahzuni Şerif, managed to channel their musical talent into the music industry, often appealing to audiences beyond the Alevi community and even becoming iconic idols of the youth, especially in Turkey. Others, such as Adnan Kılıç, declined the prospect of working in an artistic sector,

[58] This is the main left-wing newspaper at the time, which Özyürek defines a 'left-wing Kemalist daily' (Özyürek 2006:197).

devoting all their energies to the religious context, playing as *Zakir* during the rituals and teaching music, the *semah*s and Alevi tenets of belief in the *cemevi*s.

During the early 1990s, because of the scarce practical knowledge of the *semah*s among the *dede*s in Germany, some Alevi associations started to encourage their rediscovery and learning by inviting experts from Turkey. For instance, the first Alevi association established in Basel, invited Edibe Sulari, daughter of Aşık Sulari, to form a *semah* group there. In 1993, after Sulari lost her life among the other victims at the Madimak Hotel in Sivas, some of the members of the group continued to practice with the aid of video recordings from the past and from Turkey. In the second half of the 1990s, the same association invited Mehmet Aydoğmuş from the Sahkulu Sultan Vakfı in Istanbul to work as a professional visiting *semah* teacher. Aydoğmuş stayed in Basel over several weeks before conducting similar workshops in other Alevi associations in cities such as Zurich, Weil am Rhein and Offenburg. With the purpose of leaving documentation for future *semah* practitioners, in Basel Aydoğmuş also worked on the production of further video-recordings of *semah* figures. Beyond the ritual context however, the *semah*s started to be performed also at more mundane events, such as during wedding celebrations, and they became adapted in somewhat artificial and stylized theatrical or choreographic works, such as those directed by Mehmet Aydoğmuş in Turkey and Hasan Yükselir in Germany (Greve 2006:296-298).

In sharp contrast to the way the Turkish State had been managing Aleviness, in 2000 the Alevis achieved legal public recognition in Germany framed more in terms of religion than in terms of culture. Legal recognition in terms of religion developed also in Austria, Sweden and Denmark, and finally, also in the

United Kingdom. This was achieved in summer 2015, when the Charity Commission for England and Wales recognized the British Alevi Foundation, an umbrella body of twelve Alevi centres dispersed in the United Kingdom, as a religious charity (Hürriyet Daily News 2015). The political participation of the very small Alevi population in Britain (according to the Britanya Alevi Federasyonu, 300,000 civilians) strengthened their alliance with the main opposition party to the Tory government. By the end of August 2015, just few days before winning the Labour leadership election, Jeremy Corbyn visited and delivered a speech at one of the main Alevi cultural centres and *cemevi* in London. In his speech Corbyn opened a dialogue with the Alevi electorate and declared his commitment 'to always stand on the side of the oppressed against the oppressors' by subscribing to what one of the Alevi students earlier in the meeting had pointed out as 'one of the most important teachings of Ali'.

In France, the 'permeable' character of Alevism is especially evident in what appears to be a unique development. Rather than pursuing legal recognition as a religion, the route presently embarked upon by the main Alevi association, the Federation of the Alevis in France (FUAF), is moving towards a commitment to ecologist politics, as I will discuss in a case study in Chapter 6. In June 2014, the FUAF allied with the Nicholas Hulot foundation, one of the largest ecologist organisations in the country. It was established in 1990 by the celebrity environmentalist who was appointed in May 2017 Minister for the Ecological and Inclusive Transition under the first Philippe government, but then resigned slightly more than a year later because of president Emmanuel Macron's unwillingness to subscribe to his environmental strategy (Chrisafis 2018).

This development should be understood in the framework of French approaches to migration policies and citizenship. France, where the largest number of migrants come from the Maghreb, has been a host country for Turkish citizens more marginally and with historical specificities and a model of integration that differs from the German one in important ways. Roughly stated, republicanism in France relies on a formal and universalist notion of equality between citizens that derives from the ideals of the French Revolution. Unlike the German case, the French emphasise the right of soil over blood, French law prohibits both special treatment and any positive or negative discrimination, thus imposing a 'blind' policy in relation to different cultural and ethnic identities.[59] What has been labelled 'republican assimilation' 'required a gradual and complete obliteration of important cultural differences between the French by origin and foreigners coming through tides of immigration in the French soil' (Fuga 2008:1). Compared to the Turkish migration to Germany, the Turkish migration to France has been much less substantial. This is also reflected in the rather sparse academic attention accorded to it. As a result, the migration of the Alevis here has been much more limited and it was not prompted nor regulated through political agreements between governments as was the case between Turkey and Germany starting in the 60s. In France, the Turks did not constitute the major 'other' and target against which national identity discourses emerged, as was the case for Moroccans or Algerians.

Political historian Sanim Akgönül offers one of the very few descriptions of the French Alevi community, emphasizing the lack of attention accorded to it:

[59] Rogers Brubaker (1992) compiled an historical and comparative reconstruction of French 'republican' and German 'ethno-national' citizenship formulations that has been influential in the study of integration strategies more generally all over Europe.

> Alevism in France is in the shadow of Sunnism, which receives more media coverage and represents the official religion of Turkey. Another reason Alevism is left in the shadows is the inclination of the French public to associate Turks with Sunnism and even with the Maghreb. The fact that Alevis are not active participants in the Islam-related debates in France (examples are headscarves and the position of women in society) causes the French to have little to no awareness of this minority within a minority. (Akgönül 2013:154)

In fact, until recently Alevi associations in France have been attempting to prove that Alevism epitomized *Turkishness* and Turkish Islam as entirely different from Sunnism, with the goal of distancing themselves from widespread biased preconceptions of what Islam is. However, as I will show in Chapter 5, the organisation in 2014 of a concert and mega-event in Paris by FUAF, testifies to attempt to reposition Alevism. This constitutes an innovative challenge to the shadow position that the Alevis have been experiencing there over recent decades, and a move not only beyond Islam, but also beyond a religious framing of Aleviness. This development denotes yet another articulation of that 'ever-splintering' dynamism which Mandel had predicted for Alevi futures on a transnational scale. Such affinities testify how, despite differences in scale and state policies, the emergence of Alevi organisations throughout the Turkish and diasporic context, provide a magnifying glass to recognize how philosophical systems and abstract notions grounding national citizenship models are far from being stable, but are instead highly polysemic. Recently, scholars such as Van Reekum, Duyvendak and Bertossi (2012) demonstrated how abstract notions and philosophies, terms such as *republicanism*, *laïcité*, *multiculturalism*, *diversity*, *tolerance*, *equity*, *anti-racism*, *human rights*, are continuously re-defined by policy makers and differently experienced by social actors who have moved within and beyond nation-states. In fact, despite relying on very contrasting citizenship philosophies, different national models of integration, like the French 'republican'

and the German ‘ethno-national’ one, may end up with quite similar government policies. Accordingly, relative newcomers to Europe, such as the Alevis, may adopt quite similar strategies to ‘integrate’ and fit in. It is for these reasons that more ethnographically sensitive approaches, as the one that I wish to pursue, may assist in the analysis of how integration strategies are practically articulated and experienced.

2.9 Conclusions

Setting up my goal to be that of trying ‘to understand, if not what Alevism is, at least, how it works’ (Massicard 2003:125), in this chapter I introduced the reader to the complexity and dynamism of Alevi identities and histories, also specified my use of the terms *Alevi*, *Alevism* and *Aleviness*. Referring to the ‘Köprülü paradigm’ and its critiques, I unpacked how Turkish modern historiography understood the Alevis as descendants of Turkmen tribes which were less Islamized because of their settling in remote locations on the Anatolian peninsula and then on border territories between the Ottoman and the Safavid Empire. Stressing ethnic homogeneity, the modern Turkish national discourse understood the religious beliefs and practices of Alevi groups to have retained ancient Shamanic elements characteristic of Turkic groups throughout Central Asia and forced the Kurdish elements within them to be silenced. I thus discussed recent questionings of some of the long-established ‘myths of the research’ in Alevi studies (Bozarslan 2003) and novel trends that reconsidered the relevance and use of written sources within Alevi cultural transmission, especially in relation to the studies of Alevi musical and choreographic traditions. More than its place within Islam, I pointed to contemporary popular narratives that promote other understanding of the origins

of Alevi beliefs and practices, for instance tracing back their ancestry to medieval Christian heresies in Europe, such as the Cathars, or ancient indigenous populations of Anatolia, such as the Luwians.

In contemporary Turkey, such articulations of descents are entrenched within wider socio-political and economic clashes. Consequently, in this chapter, I approached these clashes through a discussion of the state-driven processes of folklorization and 'Alevi opening' as well as through an overview of the political requests advanced by Alevi organisations to the state. I thus showed how these requests often transpire in the context of commemorative events during which the Alevis claim justice for the episodes of violence under which they perished over the last decades. Because the massacre of Alevis and other intellectuals and artists during a gathering in Sivas in 1993 represents the most emblematic of such episodes, in the chapter I discussed how the commemoration of this event generated a victimhood discourse and a shift of the field of Alevi struggles towards more embodied politics, into which the diffusion of *semah* public performances has had a crucial role.

An evaluation of the construction and negotiation of the Alevi category thus helps recognise the reasons why over recent years the AKP government led a process of 'alevitization' of political dissent. In this light, I approached some of the grim current developments occurred during the time when the research was conducted, such as the role of the Alevis throughout the Gezi Park protests and their repression in 2013, the Soma mine disaster in 2014, the ongoing civil war in Kurdistan and the witch hunt climate which followed on a failed coup attempt on July 2016. Finally, the chapter summarized some of the most cogent studies which emphasize the need to look at articulations of Alevi identities in a transnational

perspective, thus emphasizing the primary role of the Alevi diasporas in shaping the political requests and cultural production of Aleviness both in Turkey and internationally.

3. The *semah*s within Alevi rituals: narratives, performance and professionalisation

3.1 Introduction

During fieldwork research, most of the Alevis I met stressed how the *semah* must be understood within the complex dynamics of the *ayn-i cem* ritual. Even when performed on the stage, the *semah*s are evocative of their primary embedment within such ritual contexts and it is emphasized that it is not possible to understand them without first considering their ritual framing. For this reason, through ethnographic insight and cross-readings of relevant literature, in this chapter I intend to provide an overview of the overall ritual framework within which the *semah*s are embedded as a structured movement system. Accordingly, I aim to address the following questions:

- In what ways do Alevi rituals contribute to the construction of Alevi identities?
- How does the anthropology of performance and ritual help understand the material and performative changes within the ritual events?
- In what ways are the *semah*s part of Alevi rituals?
- What are the written historical records about the *semah*s within these rituals and how have these been studied in academic literature?

This discussion should thus provide a contextual and historical foundation upon which it will be possible to address the questions of how to best represent and analyse the *semah*s' kinetic morphologies and their adaptation on the stage in the next chapter.

However, to understand the changing ritual contexts within which the *semah*s are presently embedded and to better appreciate their adaptation on the stage over the following chapters, the following discussion will also incorporate consideration of changes in Alevi rituals by focusing on issues of professionalisation of Alevi bodily knowledge in performing arts expertise. For this reason, the chapter will also ask two further questions:

- In what terms have the rituals and the *semah*s been professionalised?
- What is the relationship between the professionalisation of the rituals and the professionalisation of the Alevis as public performers?

The discussion provided in this chapter demonstrates how the professionalisation of the Alevis in the performing arts did not enable a marketization of Alevi identity for the demands of the entertainment industry. On the contrary, the social commitment nurtured throughout several Alevi performing arts projects is often not sufficiently explained by the familiar, religious or spiritual attachments of their makers. This chapter thus pursues and articulates the hypothesis that professionalisation in the performing arts of the Alevis sprung out of a robust form of civic commitment, which found its *raison d'être* in the fostering of the national and transnational transmission, (re)production and diffusion of an otherwise silenced Alevi memory.

Written reports of the *ayn-i cem* are countless. More often than not, these reports tend to offer prescriptive, literary or idealized depictions of the rites (i.e. Schubel 2010) rather than accounts of the material articulations through which they occur. The prominence of these idealized representations, which persists both in academic works as well as in liturgical texts written for Alevi devout readership, largely depends on the emphasis that is given to what the rituals are supposed to

stand for beyond their variations in terms of lineages, timespans and geographies. As such, such idealized depictions often supply for the lack of a unified ritual script shared by a plethora of diversified Alevi groups. This variety in Alevi ritual practices is nevertheless treasured as contributing to Alevi cultural richness, as expressed in an anonymous saying that catches the idea of unity within multiplicity: *yol bir, sürek bin bir* (lit. 'the way is one, the ways to go through it are a thousand and one').[60] Because of such variety, resorting to a theoretical framework elaborated by ritual scholar Michael Stausberg, Robert Langer discussed Alevi rituals only in terms of a 'constellation of (resembling) practices'. Explaining similarities as well as notable differences, Langer argues that:

> Although we can find networks of religious specialists and their lay-people, attached to each other over generations, stretching across wide ranges of Anatolia and Upper Mesopotamia, and although the groups in question indisputably shared several beliefs and practices that are common to modern Alevism, we can only speak of a 'constellation of (resembling) practices'. This fact can be proven by means of ethnographical material describing different forms of religious practice (although we have no complete description of a pre-modern ritual), and by the fact that contemporary Alevis complain about the different local traditions on how to conduct a 'proper' cem-ritual. Alevis usually see this local differentiation of practice as a direct result of Sunni oppression. Activists want to overcome this heterogeneity of ritual forms by a 'unified' cem. (Langer 2010:92)

Whereas on the one hand the great array of regional, lineage and migratory differences makes Alevi ritual forms diverse, on the other hand their embedment into a shared network of religious beliefs and practices makes them cohesive. In this sense, the scholar who aims to confine the ritual into a straightforward and unified model will encounter the same difficulties that Alevi activists and religious

[60] The Alevi intellectual Esat Korkmaz remarks on such a variety in Markussen (2012:63).

managers find when it comes to encapsulating such a heterogeneity in a standardized ritual script.

Moreover, even though rituals are normally perceived from emic perspectives to be 'traditional' events *par excellence*, and thus understood as the reproduction of practices that are 'fixed' both in time and space, ethnographic analysis and comparison reveals the extent to which they are also flexible and changing. It is in this spirit that Langer examined Alevi rituals through the theoretical framework of the 'transfer of ritual', an approach used to analyse relations between the change in contexts of the rituals due to factors such as migration, transnationalism and the information society, and transformations of the actual ritual performances.[61] In Langer's words:

> This (theory) concerns particularly the dynamical alterations rituals go through when their contexts are changed as well as the effects transformations of rituals can have on social actors confronted with such processes. (Langer 2010:95)

Through this approach, Langer constructed a model to systematically discuss changes in ritual performances, such as the re-organisation of ritual spaces, the integration of novel elements (in terms of language, symbols, and melodies) from adjacent religious traditions, the 'professionalisation' and 'virtualisation' of the events, or the reconfiguration of gender roles. As Langer remarks, such changes contribute to vivid debates about ritual contents and meanings in the attempt to

[61] The 'transfer of ritual' distinguishes between 'contextual aspects' and 'internal' dimentions of rituals. The theory postulates that "when a ritual is transferred, i.e. when one or more of its contextual aspects is changed, changes in one or more of its internal dimensions can also be expected" (Langer et al. 2006:2). For a concise discussion, see Langer et al 2006. The theory was developed in the frame of the Collaborative Research Center 'Dynamics of Ritual' at Heidelberg University focusing on formerly so-called 'heterodox' groups of Islamic origins. For further applications of the theory to Alevi rituals, see Langer (2013).

define a ‘canon’ which would be valid throughout transnational Alevi ‘communities of practice’. At the same time, they contribute to the emergence of individualised understandings of these rituals, to the point that some highly successful Alevi businessmen whom Langer interviewed would consider the ritual (with good reason) as ‘a psycho-social therapy or *esoteric* practice for themselves’ (Langer 2010:115). However, Langer’s model remains confined to the exploration of how rituals have been transferred to novel ritual contexts, leaving unexplored many of the contexts beyond the rituals within which the *semah*s are presently embedded. My focus on movement and adaptation wishes thus to expand such an understanding of ‘transfer’ in terms of the professionalisation of Alevi ritual bodily knowledge as performing arts expertise. Accordingly, in 3.6 I will question how we may push the concept of ‘transfer of ritual’ further to investigate how Alevi rituals have been adapted beyond the religious dimension and embedded in secular frameworks as part of staged performing arts projects.

In terms of ethnography, my understanding is informed by the specificity and limits of the *ayn-i cem* events in which I participated. Between 2010 and 2016, I participated in seven *cem* organised in several *cemevi*s in Turkey, France and England, including in the neighbourhoods of Sıhhiye and Dikmen in Ankara, in the town of Tekke in the region of Antalya, in the Dalston neighbourhood in London and in the municipality of Bondy at the outskirts of Paris. I also participated in several shorter ritual events called *muhabbet* (term referring to a feeling of affection, as well as to a friendly conversation) in some of the *cemevi*s mentioned above, as well as in two different *cemevi*s in the Tuzluçayır neighbourhood in Ankara and in the Şahkulu Dergahı in Göztepe, Istanbul, among others. More than participating in the rituals, I visited some prominent Alevi religious centres,

sometimes as part of prearranged study trips, such as the one organised by Dr. Hans Theunissen at the Karacaahmet Dergahı in Üsküdar, Istanbul. Still in an urban context however, I also visited much more peripheral and invisible Alevi cultural centres such as one in Fatih, Istanbul and one in North London.

Frameworks in the anthropology of ritual and performance will be used to organise my ethnographic insights and reference to relevant literature. To approach the complexity of these ritual events, these frameworks allow us to envision an overall model beyond each specific event enactment. Together with sensitivity to my own bodily engagement and motivated by the intention of documenting the movements as will be delineated further in Chapter 4, these frameworks allow us to appreciate the ways in which material changes affecting the *cem* are interrelated to changes in performance. A perspective based in the anthropology of ritual and performance assists in disenchanting the idealised representations that characterise most of ritual descriptions. Moreover, such a perspective helps debunk the conceptual polarity which often distances Alevi ritual events from Alevi staged performances. For instance, attention to a quality of 'flow' and to the 'framings' through which these events are articulated, sheds light on the way both rituals and stage events help maintain the cohesion of Alevi communities and the transmission of their memory. As will be shown in what follows, the 'eventful' qualities which characterise both ritual and staged performances provide Alevi moving bodies with a means of social reproduction and renovation. As Chapter 4 will delineate further, cultivating a dynamically embodied participatory style and critical use of the Kinetography Laban during ethnographic fieldwork and research delivery, combined to challenge some of the misconceptions which have been associated with processes of *semah* professionalisation or attainment of

public visibility. In many ways, this meant getting closer to the perspectives of the moving and performing persons and looking at the ritual and staged phenomena as part of a continuum in the production and transmission of Alevi memory.

3.2 The *ayn-i cem* rituals and theatrical elements

The relationship between ritual and performance has interested both anthropologists and performance scholars for a long time.[62] Quoting from Arnold Van Gennep's classic *Les Rites de Passage* (1909) and the theories in the anthropology of performance delineated by Victor Turner (1969), William Beeman asserts that all religious ritual has a performative component. Beeman claims that, as performance, ritual can be considered:

1) 'purposeful enactment or display behaviour carried out in front of an audience';
2) aiming at 'chang(ing) the cognitive state of participants';
3) in which 'some performers are more effective' than others;
4) that is 'collaborative';
5) as well as 'iterative', 'ongoing', 'ultimately unpredictable in its results';
6) taking place 'within culturally defined cognitive frames that have identifiable boundaries';
7) that is most effective when 'the performers and audience achieve full engagement with the performance activity through *flow*';

[62] Studies at the intersection of performance and ritual studies include Bell (1997), Berghaus (1998), Csordas (1994), Franko (2007), Harrop and Njaradi (2013), Houseman (2002), Hughes-Freeland (1998), Kapferer (2004), MacAloon (1984), Moore and Myerhoff (1977), Schechner (1985), Schieffelin (2005), Turner (1982), Zarrilli (2010), Zarrilli (1986a) and (1986b); studies that focus specifically on performance and body movement in ritual include Chao (2001), Daboo (2010), David (2013), Natali (2012) and Reed (2010).

8) that carries 'broad evolutionary value for human being'. (Beeman 2013:2).

According to Beeman, the element of 'flow' and the attention to 'framing' are the two essential components that during a religious ritual create a performance effect on an audience. Resorting to Turner's notion of *communitas*, Beeman defines 'flow' as the engagement in an activity that 'involves a loss of a sense of self and a merging with both the other participants and the ritual activity' (2015:39). Such a character of flow establishes alternative forms of solidarity which can shatter the solidified structures of the state. Nonetheless, the Turkish sociologist Şerif Mardin (1984:118-121) highlighted how the different role played by tribal formations in the Middle East makes Turner's dichotomy between structure and anti-structure only partially applicable to solidarity consolidation in modern Turkish history. For instance, Mardin remarked how the Ottoman state's understanding of Alevism as a Turkmen variant of Shiism influenced by Shamanist themes made it suspicious because of its inherently anti-structural attitudes vis-à-vis official Sunnism. Through their emphasis on spontaneity and mysticism, the search for gnostic illumination (*hakikat*), and the celebration of leaders' charisma (*baraka*) against the apparatus of the *medrese* (theological schools), Alevi groups thus embodied the mind-set of *communitas* as encapsulated in cultural and religious niches escaping state control.

A quality of flow certainly distinguishes the *ayn-i cem*. During these social events, the partakers may become so engaged in the ritual activity and openly express their emotions, at times expressing cheerful feelings, more often their sorrow, often even bursting into tears. One of the most crucial features of the ritual is certainly its power to gather the community members. The word *ayn-i cem* itself

refers to this gathering function of the ritual (from Persian *â'în*, 'rule, regulation', and Arabic *djam´*, 'collecting, assembling', see Langer 2010:91). The presence of at least three devotees is normally understood to constitute the minimum necessary number to be able to uphold a ritual, thus providing a context for the participants to express their emotions through music, poetry and movement. The conspicuous role of the *zakir* and the *dede*, who often participate by playing the *bağlama*, shows how highly cherished these expressive activities are considered in the ritual contexts. Because of its liturgical prominence, the *bağlama,* a stringed lute ubiquitous in Anatolia, may even be respectfully revered by the Alevis as a stringed Kur'an (*telli Kur'an*) (i.e. see discussion in Karowleski 2015:93; Sipos and Csáki 2009:57; Soileau 2017:555; Tee 2013:2, among others). Accordingly, the *ayn-i cem* always include a musical performance of songs of a known repertoire of spiritual music (*deyiş*) (Stokes 1996:196), into which the attendees, referred to as *canlar* (lit. 'souls, lives'), dissolve into an experience of communion with the other participants and with the Divine. After the execution of other musical forms, the turning of the *semah*s occurs towards the final stage of the events, when some of the attendees stand up and start 'turning' to the accompaniment of the music and chants, thus psychophysically actualizing such an experience of social and spiritual communion.

This character of 'flow' is encompassed into specific 'frames', which are of essential significance in ritual as well as in performance. Ritual scholar Catherine Bell remarked how the dynamics of framing is one of the most salient features of performance:

> (...) distinctions between sacred and profane, the special and the routine, transcendent ideals and concrete realities can all be evoked by how some

> activities, places, or people are set off from others. Intrinsic to performance is the communication of a type of frame that says, "This is different, deliberate, and significant – pay attention!" (1997:160)

Similarly, Beeman understands the capacity of humans to 'frame' events as the capacity to '*bracket off* a spate of behaviour from the ongoing stream of social life for special treatment' (2013:7). Such a *bracketing off* is achieved through the endorsement of specific temporal and spatial landmarks that define what conduct is suitable and what is not:

> The 'frame' encloses the ritual and the performance event. It provides a clear beginning, a clear ending and 'rules' for transitions of activity between the beginning and ending. It also prescribes behaviour and language appropriate to the frame. (Beeman 2015:41)

Within the *ayn-i cem*, these landmarks are organised through a specific set of micro-rites called 'the twelve services' (*oniki hizmet*) which are performed by twelve appointees (*hizmet sahipleri*) who share the responsibility of running the execution of the overall ritual and guaranteeing its success. In contrast to the unmarked participation of all the others, these work as 'performers' or 'makers' because of their more active engagement in the preparation and delivering of the ritual.

Even though the variations of lineages, timespans and geographies make it difficult to speak about the *ayn-i cem* in generic terms, several scholars have tried to recap these twelve services within a typical model. As an introduction to his timely research on the activities of the *zakir* in the *cemevi*s of Istanbul, the ethnomusicologist and talented *bağlama* player Ulaş Özdemir (2016:78) has summarized these twelve services accordingly:

1) the *Dede* (may be referred to as *Sercem* as well): the community leader who leads the ritual;

2) the *Rehber* (‘guide’): a person responsible to help those who participate in the ritual, for instance those who are admitted during specific events, such as the *görgü cemleri* (see n. 13) and the *dede*;
3) the *Gözcü* (‘eye keeper’): an usher who maintains the order and silence during the ritual;
4) the *Çerağcı – Delilci* (‘chandler’): a person responsible for lightening the space and keeping the ritual candle burning;
5) the *Zakir*: a musician who plays and sings all the compositions that are executed during the ritual;
6) the *Ferraş*: a cleaner who uses a broom (s*üpurge*) and helps the *dede* when needed;
7) the *Sakka - İbriktar* (‘cupbearer’): a person responsible for dispensing the drinks;
8) the *Sofracı - Kurbancı - Lokmacı*: a person responsible for preparing the sacrificial offerings (*kurban*), the communal meal (*sofra*) and/or other sweet morsels (*lokma*) which will be blessed by the *dede*;[63]
9) the *Pervane - Semahcı*: a person who whirls the *semah*;
10) the *Peyik – Haberci* (‘messanger’): a person who summons the people in the village or in the province to attend the ritual once this has been organised;
11) the *İznikçi*: a person who oversees the cleanliness and properness of the ritual space;

[63] In his discussion of culinary terminology, practices and meanings associated with spiritual teaching as nourishement in Bektaşi rituals, Mark Soileau (2012) points to how the notion of a ‘morsel’ addresses the understanding that truth is achieved gradually ‘in little bites’.

12) the *Bekçi* ('doorkeeper'): a person who guarantees the security of the gathering and of the houses of those attending.[64]

During the ritual events, the service holders may be asked to perform some performative actions such as lighting the candles or sweeping the space, thus performatively demonstrating their specific role in front of all the other participants. Whilst the twelve appointees work on the actual preparation and delivery of their service, their role will however be understood also in more esoteric terms as a spiritual accomplishment in devotion to God and for the benefit of the community. Each of these services may thus be associated to a specific *post*, a complex term which is used to refer to the twelve Imams or other eminent figures in Alevi belief, as well as to the place into which these are located during the ritual.[65]

Scholarly consideration of the *cem* through theatrical methodologies was already pursued in the early 1980s. The piece *Kardeşlik Töreni - Samah* that will be discussed in Chapter 5, was inspired by a BA dissertation on the *semah*s within the Alevi rituals that the student Belgin Aygün (now Belgin Aygün Çifçiöğlü) presented at the Theatre Department of Ankara University in 1982. Aygün's dissertation intersected folklore with methodological approaches taken from the social sciences and dramatic arts under the guidance of the prominent scholar of Turkish dramatic and dancing traditions, Metin And[66] and with the backing of Turkic

[64] Andrews and Temel (2010:300) report that the Hubyar, one of the largest *ocak* (lit. 'holy lineage'), perform one service more than usual. The thirteenth would be the *definci*: 'a man responsible for burying the bones left from a sacrifice'.

[65] The term literally refers to the fur upon which they sit.

[66] Tevfik Metin And (1927-2008) is a key figure in the study of Turkish theatre, dance, play and magic. Member of a wealthy family of wine producers, And graduated from Galatasaray University in Istanbul, studied Law in London and then moved to New York where with the support of a Rockfeller Scholarship he specializing in theatre studies. Öztürkmen and Vitz (2014:3-4) offer a fond appraisal of his scholarly contributions. And has also been attacked for the inherent nationalism in his work, often silent about Kurdish

folklorist Nejat Birdoğan (see 2.3) and the anthropologist Atilla Erden.[67] Born into an Alevi background, Aygün collected ethnographic materials mostly from the regions of Antalya and Ankara, analysing the formal character of the *ayn-i cem* rituals as theatrical events. Despite this specific intersection of methodologies, Aygün conducted her research at a time when a 'performance paradigm' had not yet been strongly established in Western academia, and was rather unheard of in Turkey. Without resorting to relevant Anglo-American scholarly literature, such as the work of Erving Goffman (1959), Victor Turner (1969; 1982) or Richard Schechner (1985), Aygün's approach testifies in this sense a Turkish articulation in the emergence of performance research worldwide. The work of Metin And and of the Theatre Department at Ankara University (see 5.2) constitutes in fact a specific case that resonates with other locations and histories in the emergence of such a paradigm (see for instance, McKenzie et al. 2010).

The perception that the rituals were at risk of disappearing motivated Aygün's research, and it was in the face of this risk that her dissertation wished to find a remedy. For instance, in the introduction, Aygün elucidates that these rituals and dances 'nowadays already exist as a form only, and long ago lost their essence' (my translation from Aygün 1982:8). Her approach was thus certainly marked by a nostalgia for a rural past which coincided with neo-liberal expansion in cultural life in the early 1980s, as well as the academic and social explosion of Alevism during the last three decades. More than stressing the 'function' of rituals in Alevi social life, Aygün emphasized how the *ayn-i cem*, as locales for the articulation of dramatic actions, are characterized by *taklit* ('imitation') and by an

theatre forms, and for his inattentiveness to socio-historical context (i.e. Buğlalılar 2012:3, 74-75).

[67] Erden would later become General Secretary of the Alevi-Bektaşi Federation.

actor-spectator relationship among the participants. She thus remarked how, similarly to a theatre troupe, the *hizmet sahipleri* work together as a team to perform the duties necessary for the realization of the ritual. On the other hand, since they do not oversee any specific duty, all the other devotees may be understood to participate as spectators. Aygün also emphasizes that the rituals are enacted through the recitation of specific scripts, such as the *gülbang* prayers, and that their enactments occur in closed settings. Here, a circular space called *meydan* (lit. 'square' in standard Turkish) is left empty in front of the *dede*. As key activities take place there, Aygün suggested that this area functions like a stage. Because of her attention to such performative elements, Aygün's thesis exemplifies a very contemporary concern for documenting group actions and movements. As we shall see in detail in Chapter 4, more than musical notations of three *semah*s and few photographs of ritual actions, the appendixes to the dissertation included four graphic diagrams that roughly exemplify an aerial perspective on some movements 'through space' of the group movements during the rituals.

More recently, issues related to the interaction of participants in the ritual space have been discussed further. For instance, Özdemir (2016:77) reported that the *ayn-i cem* can be conducted in whatever space is big enough to accommodate the congregation of participants, being a *cemevi*, a big house in the villages, or any space that is spacious enough in the cities. Whereas on one side of the *meydan*, there will be the *dede* and the *zakir*, all participants should nonetheless be able to look at each other's faces, which is why the rituals are sometimes termed *cemal cemale ibadet* (lit. 'face to face devotion') (Özdemir 2016:78). This is especially important at the beginning, when the *dede* needs to make sure that a state of

consensus (*rızalık*) is established among the participants as a *sine qua non* for the ritual to start. To do this, he asks whether anyone has issues that needs addressing (on a personal, as well as on a collective level) in front of the community. Being able to look at each other's faces is thus crucial for the participants to be able to establish suchı a consensus.

Nonetheless, the quality of social intimacy encompassing the rituals that is vividly encapsulated in the expression *cemal cemale ibadet* is the one of the most contested elements in discussions of the shortcomings of modernisation and migration processes. On this matter, Aykan Erdemir reported how the anonymity of the urban rituals supposedly transformed Alevi worship 'from an intimate gathering with family, relatives, and fellow villagers, into a crowded ceremony with suspicious strangers' (2005:495). Such shifts are also reflected in the fact that, whereas the *ayn-i cem* were traditionally organised on the night between Thursdays and Fridays in the villages, it is now more common to have it on Thursday evenings, or on any available time throughout the busy schedules of urban environments (more and more over the weekends, especially on Sundays).

3.3 *Dedelik* and performance professionalism

Despite the shifts affecting the *ayn-i cem* in urban and diasporic contexts, because of their performative character, the rituals still constitute the primary locale for the creation and reproduction of Alevi communities. These are also the context within which traditional hierarchies are re-affirmed. As David Shankland has pointed out rather sharply, 'Alevis are not all born equal' (2003:39).[68] During the

[68] Shankland (2003) situates the analysis of Alevi social organization within classical studies in British social anthropology, such as the Nuer of Somalia studied by Edward Evans-Pritchard and the Berbers in Morocco studied by Ernest Gellner.

rituals, the most prominent of the *oniki hizmet* is mostly performed by a member of a priestly caste, often addressed as *dede* (lit. 'grandfather', 'elder'). The *dede* commonly belongs to a family that is part of an *ocak*, a holy lineage which is believed to originate with the Imam Ali or the saint Haci Bektaş Veli.[69] All members of Alevi families which do not belong to an *ocak* lineage are referred to as *talip*, and they are supposed to maintain a fixed relationship with a *dede*. Martin Sökefeld offers a clear explanation of the relationship between *dede*s and *talip*s:

> (…) every Alevi is supposed to be a *talip* (student, follower) of a *dede*. Also, every *dede* is the *talip* of another *dede* who is his *pir* or *mürşit*, and who has to take care of his moral conduct. Yet, taken as a general category, the designation '*talip*' refers to persons who are not *ocakzade*, i.e., who are not members of an *ocak*. *Dede-talip* relationships involve whole families and are not a matter of individual choice. They are transmitted by heredity. A man is the *talip* of the same *dede* and *ocak* as his father has been, and when a *dede* passes on his duties to his successor, usually one of his sons or nephews, the successor assumes the same responsibility towards the family. Every *dede* serves a whole network of *talip*s that may be spread over a considerable area. The *dede* is responsible not only for the spiritual but also for the moral conduct of his *talip*s. Usually, all *talip*s of a village are related with the same *dede* if the village is not too large. (Sökefeld 2008: 146)

During the ritual, the *dede* may perform several tasks which enhance the cohesiveness of the community. As a reconciliatory arbiter, he may settle disputes (*görgü*) that may have emerged among the community members. In specific circumstances, he may also exile individuals from communal life (*düskünlük*),

[69] As Dole pointed out (2012:262 n.1), the term *ocak* has also other connotations in Turkish (i.e. furnace, heart, mine, political body, guild, fraternity). Within Dole's overview of genres of healings in two neighbours in Ankara, the term *ocaklı* (lit. 'with the ocak') connotes both Alevi and Sunni healers whose special powers are attributed to their descent from an ancestor known for his ability of performing miracles (ibid.). Some *dede*s are in fact often considered able to cure illness and fulfil wishes. For other discussions of the *ocak* families in English see Tee (2010). A little booklet by Ali Yaman discusses lineages and generalogies of *dede* families, offering two lists of *ocak* trees, one including 35, the other 57 (no year: 44-46).

which is the reason why the *ayn-i cem* are sometimes considered popular trials (*halk mahkemeleri*). Moreover, with the community's consensus, the *dede* may validate the establishment of a spiritual companionship (*musâhiplik*) between two male members of the community (*musâhipler*) who were already connected by a friendly relationship, together with their respective families (i.e. see Köse 2009:107). Next to the more obvious spiritual and moral duties that the *dede* fulfils within the Alevi communities, such functions reveal the more juridical and socio-political role that he incarnates.

Some *dede*s more than others may encourage and participate in expressive forms of performance during the rituals. With different professional levels, these may occasionally engage in music making and movement of the body, such as in singing, playing the *bağlama*, or turning the *semah*s. The fact that in recent decades, several ritual officers were also professional performers is indicative of a degree of professionalisation in the performing arts involved in the rituals. The most illustrative case of such professionalisation is represented by the *özan* Dertli Divani (lit. 'Divani the Sufferer', artistic name of Veli Aykut, b. 1962). In addition to officiating the rituals as *vekil baba* affiliated to the Çelebi branch, Dertli Divani is a recording musician who released six albums between 1989 and 2014 and who was awarded the title of 'Living Human Treasure' by UNESCO in 2010. Through a very vigorous presence on online media and frequent participation in both liturgical and musical activities throughout Turkey and Alevi communities in the diaspora, Dertli Divani promotes more 'educational' approaches to the ritual activities.[70] This

[70] Özdemir reports that Dertli Divani conducts three types of cem. These are: 1) *ikrar* and *görgü cemler*, conducted once a year, are open only to those who received or are going to receive the *ikrar* (admission) to become fully spiritual mature; such rituals may also function as spiritual courts (*görgü*); 2) *haflalık cemler* (weekly cem), are organised on a weekly basis only for those who already received their yearly *ikrar*; 3) cem of various

educational intent is realized through events which negotiate the intimate qualities of the rituals with the public quality of professionalised performances, for instance as reflected in the activities of the network of transnational *bağlama* players *Mekteb-i İrfan* (lit. 'School of Wisdom') which he has directed since 2012.[71]

Some *dede*s have emphasized the importance of studying theatre to train the *dede*s in becoming more capable and skilled ritual officers. One such *dede*, also the author of a guide to the execution of the rituals (1993), is Ali Haydar Celasun Dede (1930-2016). Addressing the issue of requests for Alevi education in Turkey, Celasun affirmed:

> The Dede should be a theatre maker (…). He should be a man of letters and a painter. A lawyer, a musician, a man of science, and an *aşık*. He should be able to answer all sorts of requests that his friends, his fellow Dedes, and all the people in the community may have. He should carry on the way of Hacı Bektaş together with that of the working class. Only then will the Alevi community stand on its feet. (my translation from Celasun et al. 1992:128) [72]

Whereas the insistence that the *dede* should be a knowledgeable and experienced man is very common, the emphasis on the importance of the arts in the education of the *dede*s is in this case certainly related to Celasun's former artistic and political activity. Before becoming a *dede*, Celasun was in fact active as a prolific theatre

types, which may be dedicated to specific saints, such as Abdal Musah or Hızır, or festivities, like Nevruz: these are scheduled once a year and open to everyone. To this last category would thus belong the cem which are regularly conducted nowadays in the cemevis with more 'educational' purposes.

[71] The ethnomusicologist and musician Alex Kreger joined the activities of *Mekteb-i İrfan* in 2015, producing a report on the aural dispositions and spatial constructions in Alevi contexts he encountered (Kreger 2016).

[72] The speech was titled *Gericiliğin Panzehiri Aleviliktir* (lit. 'Aleviness is the Antidote to Obscurantism') and was given in 1991 in the Islington Central Library in London during a night organised for the remembrance of Pir Sultan Abdal.

director for more than 40 years, a profession which he learnt with Muhsin Ertuğul.[73] Furthermore, Celasun was also a transnational political activist, a Marxist-Leninist and a Kurdish nationalist leader, and spent his life between Turkey and Germany.[74] Because of the intersection of theatrical professionalism, political activism and ritual officice-holding, Celasun is one of the most emblematic figures who personifies the conflation of aesthetic, political and religious attitudes that can be embedded in transnational Alevi cultural formations. His sermons to the Alevi communities could include teachings on his activism in promoting a form of political theatre both in conventional theatrical spaces as well as on the streets or outside factories. Strongly inspired by Bertold Brecht's ideas, Celasun had established an itinerant revolutionary theatre (*Anadolu Sahne Birliği*) which aimed at combining the Epic road which was spreading among intellectual circles in Turkey over the 1960s with the traditional *orta oyunu* familiar to audiences throughout Anatolia (Nekimken 1978:316).[75] Years later, in an Alevi context, he would explain his opinions on theatre by using very accessible language, often deploying idiomatic metaphors:

> Theatre is not a place where you drink *pepsicola*. Theatre should be poisonous. It should disturb you! It should put you in motion (*devinim*) and

[73] Chief director in Turkish film and theatre for more than three decades after the establishment of the Republic, in the 1920s Ertuğul had traveled abroad and established contacts in Germany, Austria and he the Soviet Union. He is remembered for having joined Nazim Hikmet in Moscow, and meeting Konstantin Stanislavski, Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko and Vsevolod Meyerhold.

[74] A public admirer of Abdullah Öcalan, Celasun was one of the most visible leaders of KAB (*Kürt Alevi Birliği*, Kurdish Alevi Union), a confederation of more than thirty organizations of Alevis and Kurds, that was fostered by the PKK (Barkey and Fuller 1998:70).

[75] Albert Nekimken (1978:312-322) provided a detailed discussion of Celasun's personal approach to Brecht and itinerant theatre activism in Anatolia in the mid 70s. Nekimken does not mention the Alevi background of Celasun (whom he spells Cilasun), who back then had not yet become a *dede*.

> wake you up! (my translation from Celasun et al. 1992:107)

As for his view on Aleviness, Celasun understood it as a composite 'accumulation of culture' (*bir kültür birikimi)* crystallized and refined through exchange with diverse spiritual currents or mystical formations. As an enmeshing of religion and culture, Alevis were seen to comprise a resistant society beyond Islam, one that, throughout history, has embraced rebellious figures who themselves often were not born to an Alevi community, such as the mystic Şey Bedreddin, or his disciple Börkluce Mustafa (ibid. 122-125).

The accentuation of the role of the arts and more professionalised theatrical attitudes may be related to the overall loss of authority experienced by the *dede*s after processes of secularisation and urbanisation. As Robert Langer has pointed out:

> Because of that loss of structural and economical power, the practicing dedes nowadays serve as employees of the communities, not as their leaders. (Langer 2010:108)

Whereas in 'pre-modern' times the *dede*s exercised economic power over their flocks, their scopes were redefined by the emergence of new types of Alevi leaders who would now run modern Alevi organisations and represent Alevism in public. On this matter, Markus Dressler argued that such transformations lead to a limitation of the *dede*'s functions to the 'religious' context only, and, simultaneously, to an overall secularisation of his role. In his words:

> (…) *dedelik*, the institution of the *dede*, is being secularized, i.e., the role of the *dede* is constrained to ritual contexts increasingly defined as 'religious' in opposition to 'non-religious' functions such as representation of the

> community. While this means a limitation of the *dede*'s authority, it also indicates new respect, and – as I will try to show – possibilities for an extension of his influence. (Dressler 2006: 271)

One of the areas into which the *dede*s find possibilities for an extension of their influence is certainly in educational and cultural realms. The leaning towards a more professionalised mastery of the performing arts in the *dedelik* style embodied by ritual officers such as Dertli Divani Baba and Ali Haydar Celasun, demonstrates such a shift. Moreover, beyond the institution of the *dedelik* itself, the overall performance of the services has become professionalised, as we will see in more detail while discussing the enactment of the *semah*s later on in this chapter.

3.4 Narratives and performances of gender and equality

Even though a fixed distinction between *ocakzade* and *talip* families characterises Alevi social organisations, nonetheless equality (*eşitlik*) is often presented as a quintessential characteristic of the *ayn-i cem* rituals. A rhetoric of equality has its roots in written and oral narratives, the most prominent being the *miraç* (also, *miraçlama*) which recounts the Ascension of the Prophet Muhammed to heaven and its encounter with the 'assembly of the Forties' (*Kırklar Meclisi*). The narrative is included in the *İmam Cafer-i Sadık Buyruğu*, popularly referred to as *Buyruk*, a liturgical text published in the Latin alphabet in 1958 by Sefer Aytekin and then by Fuat Bozkurt in 1982, both based on a manuscript from the *ocak* of Yan Yatır from Narlıdere (province of Izmir). Fahriye Dinçer (2014:489) reported that the prolific scholar of Turkish Sufism Abdülbaki Golpınarlı (1900-1982), assessed the original text to be produced by Bisatî in 1576 during the reign of Shah Ismail's son Shah Tasmahb, even though being commonly attributed to Cafer

Sadık, the sixth of the Twelve Imams, often revered for his teachings and guiding abilities.

The narrative of the Prophet's Ascension contained in the *Buyruk* establishes the basis of the Alevi community and cosmology. This narrative is usually cited to indicate the centrality of the *semah* in Alevi belief system and rituals, and the values of equality which the practice and the overall rituals more generally embody. Fahriye Dinçer summarized this narrative as follows:

> During his famous ascent to heaven (*miraç*), Muhammad met a lion on his way. He gave his ring to the lion as a token so that he was able to pass into the presence of God, with whom he discussed the ninety thousand mysteries – some of which would be delivered to the believers and the rest would be kept secret by Ali. While turning back from the *miraç*, Muhammad saw a dome and was able to enter into it only after claiming that he is an ordinary man (not a prophet). After being welcomed, Muhammad wanted to learn about the group. He was told that all the members of the group were considered as equals, they were the Kırklar ('Forties'). Muhammad asked them to verify their claim. They said 'kırkımız birdir, birimiz kırktır' ('forty of us for one, one for forty of us'), and one of them lifted her/his arm for Muhammad to injure it with a knife. One drop of blood was seen in everybody's arm, and then bleeding of each one stopped when one of them stopped hers/his with a bandage. Selman, the fortieth member of the group just returned from Persia with one grape. Muhammed squeezed it and prepared a *şerbet* (sweet fruit juice). The *Kırklar* drank it and started to manifest their enthusiasm. Muhammed joined the *semah*, his headgear fell down and torn into forty pieces. Each member took one and wore one piece. (Dinçer 2014: 490)

The fact that Mohammed is accepted within the Assembly only after refraining from claiming his special status as prophet points to the egalitarianism of the group, as well as to the supremacy of Ali over Mohammed as the ultimate carrier of the Islamic message. Moreover, the narrative establishes three vivid references with regard to the social unity and enthusiasm that the Alevi communities are invited to realise during the rituals. Such references are articulated through bodily metaphors related to blood (the swift and synchronic bleeding of the group), nourishment (the

sufficiency of a sole grape to provide an intoxicating drink for all) and clothing (the capacity of the members partaking in the *semah* to wear pieces of the same headgear). Such bodily metaphors converge in the sharing of the *semah*, activity during which the members allegedly become physically and spiritually united.

In his translation and commentary in English, Vernon Schubel observed how the narrative dramatically demonstrates the spirit of *communitas* embodied by the Forties. Metaphors such as the sharing of blood provide the rituals with a script, on the basis of which the community members attempt to transcend the relative egalitarianism that is found in the *şeriat* and approach instead mystical equality. In Schubel's words:

> Within the liminal context of the cem, which takes place in a realm between worlds, the *erenler*[76] are all one, rejecting hierarchy and marks of status. Men and women mix freely. It is indeed a place of humility and sacredness. (…) They are all perceived as equal, and on a certain level they have all become one. (2010:338)

Accordingly, Schubel emphasised that such equality is articulated regardless of gender, age and ethnicity, pointing out that the Assembly is composed of both men and women, of elders, adults and children, and of persons coming from ethnically varied backgrounds. Although descriptions of the ritual often refer to this spirit of equality, however, ethnographic attention to the performances themselves allows a more nuanced understanding of what remains 'behind the scenes' during these ritual events. Attention to such aspects, often concealed in the literature, helps unpack the ways in which such liturgical scripts are capable of establishing a

[76] As *canlar*, the term, meaning 'those who attained (spiritual perfection)' is often used to refer to the participants of the ritual.

climate of equality among the participants, while at the same time also of perpetuating more or less tangible inequalities. Attention to gender dynamics and customs is for instance revelatory of these less tangible elements of inequality.

Although it is a very unusual occurrence amongst contemporary Alevi communities, the direction of the ritual may technically be carried out by a woman rather than by the *dede*. This woman leader would be referred to as *ana* (lit. 'mother'), a title that is gained through marriage to a *dede* and indicates affiliation into an *ocak* lineage. In 2010, Langer observed that the German Alevi council of *dede*s included one *ana*, a woman who had led a *cem* even though only in private (2010:115). Langer thus suggested that such developments, together with the fact that more women take on leadership roles in Alevi organisations and express the wish to become ritual specialists more frequently than in the past, may be indicative of reconfigurations on gender lines of authority within the rituals. During his research on the activities of the *zakir* in the *cemevi*s of Istanbul, Özdemir (2016:213) noticed that even when women figured in the organising committees of Alevi organisations and even though most participants in these contexts were mostly women of middle to mature age, *ana*s and women *zakir* never figured in the ritual officers' hierarchy. During my fieldwork experience, even when I learned about *cemevi*s or pilgrimage centres devoted to an *ana*, such as the one dedicated to Elif Ana (1903-1991) in Pazarcık, Kahramanmaraş, I could never join or hear of *cem* rituals led by a woman. Despite a lack of historical research on the topic, the *ana*s are said to have led the ceremonies more often in the past and in the villages, a custom which disappeared in conjunction with the current management of the rituals in urban environments.

The term *ana* is at present more often used to refer to female spiritual

leaders known for their abilities to perform miracles and healing beyond the context of the rituals. In his study of the interweaving of secularism and religious healing in contemporary Ankara (2012), medical anthropologist Christopher Dole explores in depth the social role of one such woman, Zöhre Ana, and the networks revolving around her charismatic persona. Zöhre Ana (*zühre* meaning 'Venus', thus lit. 'Mother Venus')[77] established herself as a female healer attracting both Alevi and Sunni patients by cultivating a distinctively 'modern' aesthetic. This was articulated through language (showing command of both scientific and medical discourse), appearance (a woman with a short hair-cut and business suit) and ideological stance (a staunch supporter of the secularist reforms carried on by Atatürk as well as of the need for equal rights for women and men and gender inclusiveness in religious practice). It is unfortunate that Dole's monograph does not offer detailed descriptions of Zöhre Ana's bodily healing performances, nor does it discuss the extent to which her ethics were rooted in Alevi knowledge, ritual practices, and symbolism.[78] Ethnographic anecdotes within his monograph are however revelatory of the implicit threat that powerful female figures such as Zöhre Ana constitute for the *ocak* structures upheld by the rituals. For instance, in a vignette, a *dede* reprimands one of Zöhre Ana's female patients, a wife wrongly accused of being too licentious and subsequently beaten by her abusive husband, for consulting the healer, in his view an impostor who claims to be a saint (*evliya*) despite not belonging to an *ocak* family (Dole 2012:177). Blind to the woman's daunting condition and ratifying Zöhre Ana's illegitimate status, the *dede* reaffirms the patriarchal structure carried forward by the *ocak* lineages, a framework that

[77] I wish to thank Elif Ceylan Özsoy for pointing out this meaning.

[78] Berna Zengin Aslan pointed out such shortages in her review of the book (2015). Discussions with Veronica Buffon helped clarify these points.

female spiritual leadership is not capable of challenging and on the contrary ends up reinforcing.

The position of women in Alevi culture and belief system is often claimed to be similar to that of Shamanic Turkic tribes of Central Asia.[79] Furhermore, Alevis may cherish the role of important female figures in Alevi doctrines, such as Fatma, Kadıncık Ana and Hüsniye.[80] Nonetheless, the absence of prominent female leadership within the rituals contradicts the rhetoric of gender equality with which the Alevis tend to represent their cultures. As we have seen, an image of the rituals as events quintessentially characterised by equality tends to be reproduced uncritically in academic literature, such as in the article by Schubel presented above. On the contrary, several feminist scholars have pointed out how academic work has normally failed to reflect objectively on the problems that face Alevi women. Accordingly, these feminist perspectives explored the tensions between the ideal representation of equality and the gendered nature of ritual practices and roles. The insights provided by two of these critiques, one by Fazilet Ahu Özmen, the other by Nimet Okan, are worth mentioning as they help us unpack how structural inequalities are reflected and reproduced in the ritual performances.

Conducting research among Alevi women both in secular and ritual Alevi

[79] Sultanova (2011) is a reference point on the interplay of Shamanistic and Islamic ritual in Central Asia, which are discussed through a gendered prism of music and dance traditions.

[80] Both Fatma and Kadıncık Ana are however revered mostly for their relationship to a prominent man: Fatma as Mohammed's daughter and Ali's wife, and Kadıncık Ana as Hacı Bektaş's adoptive daughter or spiritual wife, as well as for her decisive role in establishing the Bektaşi order with the help of her disciple Abdal Musah. On the contrary, the figure of Hüsniye is more challenging towards patriarchal ideologies and was often censured in Turkish modern history (Azak 2010:151-152). A beautiful and knowledgeable slave living in the court of Harun Reşit, Hüsniye is recounted for winning a dispute against the Ulema on the origin of evil and sin. For a summary of the narrative in English, see Birge (1937:126-128).

contexts in Göztepe, Istanbul, Fazilet Ahu Özmen (2013) has considered three key factors that contribute to the maintenance of patriarchal structures and the perpetration of violence against women in an Alevi context. The first of these factors is the *musâhiplik* (spiritual companionship), a practice that marks the devotees' maturity of belief but in which women can only participate via their husbands, since there is no equivalent practice devoted to them. The second factor is the disproportionate importance that is given to marriage, seen as a religious obligation (*farz*) more than as social duty (any unmarried Alevi person being also considered unable to gain a *musâhip*, thus to achieve full maturity of belief). The third factor derives from the difficulty in obtaining a divorce: while only monogamy is allowed among the Alevis and divorce is not solely the unilateral decision of men, obtaining one can be very difficult since it requires the consent of the whole community who must be convinced of its necessity at a meeting of the *ayn-i cem*. Accordingly, Özmen reports how partners who divorce without a convincing reason are normally ostracized as *düşkün* (lit. 'fallen').

As for the performance of gender within Alevi rituals, Nimet Okan's fieldwork research (2018) among the Anşabacılıs is of special interest. This Alevi sub-ethnic group carries forward reverence for Anşa Bacı, a woman who led the village of Acısu in Zile, Tokat and is now remembered for her capacity to perform miracles and for resisting the investigations of the Ottoman administration in 1894 (Okan 2018:77). Okan highlights how a rhetoric of gender equality is used among the Anşabacılıs to claim distinction from Sunni Islam but remains often unquestioned within the rituals, which, on the contrary, reproduce a number of patriarchal structures operative in the community. Okan shows thus that the notion of *can* (soul) which makes women and men the same, practically obscures the

asymmetric relations between the two genders (2018:84); relations which become more evident by looking at male violence in the private sphere and discrimination against women in accessing inheritance.[81] Okan thus demystifies such asymmetries by unpacking why women never voice complaints on these issues in the ritual context, even when they may repeatedly be beaten at home. The fact that abusive husbands are never declared *düşkün* during the rituals clearly reveals the ways though which the rituals serve more to sanction women's subordinate status rather than to sustain their emancipation.[82]

In place of its idealised depiction, ethnographic attention to the actual performances of the rituals and sensitivity to marginal rather than the authoritative voices within Alevi cultures, may provide an important rectification of this image. As Okan stated:

> To understand the difference between the idealized and the real, the voices of Alevi women, particularly those Alevi women in pretender (*talip*) status, must be heard. These can act as a counterbalance to the academic work that has been produced without having listened to these voices (or having made contact with the women) and is in danger, therefore, of turning the idealized claim of equality into an empty slogan. (2018:85)

More than the voice of Alevi women, as suggested by this passage, the insight offered by those Alevis who would not participate in the rituals, who thus stand more as outsiders within Alevi cultures, is worth mentioning. More than women,

[81] Among the Anşabacılıs 'a father or brother can take the 'consent' of a daughter or sister' by offering her a little gift rather than giving them their hereditary share and no woman to date has gained her inheritance rights by a court decision (Okan 2018:79).

[82] Another study which is worth mentioning is Şengül Eruçar's Master's thesis (2010) which analyses through a feminist approach the ongoing negotiations, legitimizations and interpretations of gender tensions in two *cemevi*s in Istanbul and Isparta.

non-heteronormative Alevi persons may complicate such an often-stereotypical image. For instance, the views of Umut, an Alevi HIV-positive man whom I met in London in 2016, are revelatory of the inherent disillusionment which may accompany the rising into what is considered to be an intrinsically equal and progressive background. Born in Ankara, Umut moved to the UK in the early 2000s, at the age of 20, to pursue a career in the arts, eventually becoming an accomplished interior designer. During an informal conversation, he disclosed that, even though he would be able to afford to travel back often to Turkey to visit his relatives or even to relocate there, he is still normally reluctant to go. Similarly, he would not participate in the events organised by the Alevi community in England. This is because he perceived his own relatives and the Alevi community more broadly to be as conservative as the Sunnis, but even more deceitful than them because of the way they may staunchly think of themselves as liberal and progressive. His discomfort was heightened when he received deeply negative reactions from his family members to his gay sexuality and seropositive condition.

3.5 The *semah*s as ritual and dance

As we have seen, despite a rhetoric of equality (conveyed for instance through the addressing of the participants as genderless *canlar*), the fact that gender roles are unevenly distributed within the *ayn-i cem* rituals hints at the inherent patriarchal structure reproduced therein. The high preponderance of *dede* over *ana* figures, and the lack of a bonding mechanisms such as the *musâhiplik* for the women, provide clear evidence of this imbalance. Nonetheless, the fact that men and women worship together in the *semah*s reinforces a rhetoric of equality vis-à-vis the gender segregation of Sunni rituals. The *hizmet* associated with the

*semah*s is at times indicated as *semahcı*, at times as *pervane*, or *pervazcı*. In standard Turkish, the term *pervane* stands for 'propeller' and 'moth', a nocturnal butterfly spinning around a light, references which all convey the idea of whirling. Üzüm (1997:146-147) specifies that the *pervane* is the one who, through the *semah,* displays the feelings of enthusiasm and sublime commitment provoked by the love for Allah, Muhammed, Ali, the twelve imams, the Ehl-i Beyt and Hacı Bektaş Veli.

Despite the gender mingling emphasised during the practice, and contrarily to the other roles performed within the ritual, this *hizmet* is the role that is most frequently assigned to a woman. Among some lineages, this would never be appointed to a man. For instance, in their systematic survey of the Hubyar, one of the major *ocak* lineages, Peter Andrews and Hidir Temel specify that the *pervazcı* is 'a woman who turns alone in a dance' (2010:300). Offering a brief overview on relevant literature related to meanings and forms of the *semah*, this section will show how the emphasis on gender mingling in the practice is possibly the most recurring element in its discussions in the literature.

Whereas the performance of the *semah* during the ritual is most commonly understood to constitute one of the twelve *hizmet*s (i.e. Greve 2006:289), some scholars clarified this role without making explicit reference to the *semah*. For instance, Öztürkmen (2005:252) vaguely mentions that the *pervane* is a person that during the ritual is 'guarding the inside and the outside', and Erdemir and Yaman (2006:75) explain it as the person who is 'occupied with the people coming and going'. Some scholars have underlined how, rather than as one of the pre-organised services, the *semah* is realised after the spontaneous participation by any of the attendees in the ritual (Arnaud-Demir 2002:49-53). Langer understands

this variance as part of attempts at professionalising the religious duties, a professionalisation through which lay people (especially youngsters) manage to gain agency within the ritual in contrast to the prevalence of elder practitioners in the past. In his words:

> Nowadays it is in most of the cases occupied by 'official' dance groups, generally young people, and performance is considered more valid if rehearsed figures are performed and the participants wear especially designed costumes. In this context, not only lay people, but also the younger generations — the main clientele of dance and music courses — emancipated themselves from traditional roles and gained agency in the field of modern ritual practice. (Langer 2010:109-110)

The understanding of *semah*s as dance, however, is problematic and the question of which terms are the most fitting to describe them in academic language has been already debated within Alevi studies. Even though most of scholarly literature published in English often mentions that Alevi rituals include a section dedicated to dancing, some researchers have remarked that there is no historical evidence that the *semah*s were ever recognized as dance, and do not consider this categorization appropriate from an Alevi perspective.[83] In a footnote of an article in which the Alevi revival is read through the historical fabrication of nationalisms, Karin Vorhoff (1998:248) brackets the word *dancing* and specifies that the 'Alevis would qualify the *semah* not as a dance, bound to worldly affairs, but as a form of

[83] Even when aware of the problems of translating the *semah* as 'dance', scholars writing in English or in French still tend to use the expression, often in association with adjectives such as 'sacred' or 'ritual'. For instance, Stokes defined the *semah* a dance whose 'steps were not known at all outside of Alevi communities' (1996:196-197). Langer uses 'ritual dancing' (2010:91). Similarly, Tee (2014:37) writes 'evening classes in dancing the *semah*'. Arnaud-Demir (2013) writes 'danse rituelle'. Yıldırım writes that Ibn Battūta witnessed 'singing and dancing rituals, or samā'' (2011:175). Pinkert initially refrains from using the term 'dance' explaining the *semah* as 'sung poetry and sacred movements' (2016:2), but then defines it as 'the sacred dance that completes the main part of the service' (2016:8).

devout meditation'**.** The singer and ethnomusicologist Françoise Arnaud-Demir (2005:143) warned that there is no evidence in historical sources that the *semah* constituted a phenomenon recognized as a dance, nor was such a classification used, even recently, by the practitioners themselves. Given the scarce indications of how the practice was historically understood and the reluctance of the practitioners themselves (which she terms 'Sufis') in using it, Arnaud-Demir invites prudence in calling the *semah* a 'dance'.

The first scholar to study the *semah* through a methodological framework of dance ethnography was the oral historian Arzu Öztürkmen in an article significantly titled 'Staging a Ritual Dance Out of its Context' (2005). Öztürkmen understood the *semah* as a 'structured movement system', a heuristic category first advocated by dance anthropologist Adrienne Kaeppler for her analysis of aesthetics, dance and culture in Tonga (1978).[84] Recounting the story of Durmuş Genç, a pioneer folk dance artist who in the late 1960s arranged a staging of the *semah* inside the Boğazici University Folklore Club, Öztürkmen unpacked how performing the *semah*s out of their ritual context was perceived as a rather courageous action. Normally embedded in the rather secretive context of the village rituals, the urban re-casting of the practice as folk dance was innovative and often associated with leftist ideologies. Through discussion of the 'structured movement system', Öztürkmen approached the re-framings of the practice into folklore, shedding light on the re-organisation of some of its morphologies and meanings. Following on from Öztürkmen's lead, by looking at the *semah*s as 'movement systems' within stage performances beyond the ritual contexts, I wish to approach the *semah*s'

[84] Kaeppler defined a structure movement system as a 'a system of knowledge, which is socially and culturally constructed, known and agreed upon by a group of people and primarily preserved in memory' (1978:32).

resilience, flexibility and dynamism. Nonetheless, in paying attention to their adaptations, throughout the case studies discussed in Part 2, I will move beyond the folkloric dimension to investigate the reframing of morphologies and meanings as part of a wider range of professionalised theatrical projects. In so doing, I suggest that rather than as a distorted version 'out of context', these innovative forms may be considered as adaptations that have emerged through reconstruction and reinvention. Because the religious context is no longer the only possible one for their performance, I propose that, within folkloric as well as theatrical contexts, the *semah*s themselves would be more appropriately regarded as a ritual movement system differently contextualized.

For the researcher, the refusal to label the *semah* as dance is a cogent problem that invites reflection on the categories used in anthropological research and their inherent western ethnocentrism. This terminological reluctance highlights the term's insufficiency as a category for transcultural translation, not only between the Alevis and academia but also between different Alevi contexts. In other words, it exposes a logical discrepancy in translation between the social facts and their scholarly understanding. This discrepancy invites the researcher to assess the historicity of dance as a cultural category in Turkish contemporary history. Such an enquiry was already underway in the 1970s, when Metin And produced several publications in English (i.e. And 1963-1964;[85] 1976) which were pivotal in bringing the study of Turkish expressive traditions in dialogue with Western ones. More recently, Öztürkmen (i.e. 2001, 2016) extensively investigated dance within the history of the Turkish Republic and beyond, assessing the political valence and

[85] Especially, the chapters 'Plays and Dances of Turkish Peasants' (53-61) and then the section on 'Ballet' (115-117).

geo-cultural influence of diverse terms such as *oyun*, *raks* and *dans*, which all translate the concept of 'dance' in contemporary Turkish language. In Alevi perspectives, neither of these terms would be sufficient in defining the *semah*s. The *semah* is certainly not *dans*, a term borrowed from the French language, which refers primarily to dancing in modern contexts, such as ballet, disco dancing, stage dancing, or ballroom dancing. It is not *raks*, term of Arabic origin used for social and professional dancing.[86] The most important distinction that Alevis I met commonly maintain is however that the *semah*s are not to be recognised as *oyun*. A much-quoted poem attributed to the saint Haci Bektaş Veli recalls this distincion:

> *Haşaki bizim semahımız oyuncak değildir.*
> *O bir aşk halidir, salincak değildir.*
> *Her kimki semahı bir oyun sayar*
> *Onun namazı kılınır değildir.*
>
> God forbid that our *semah*s should be a plaything.
> That is a state of love, it is not a swing.
> If anyone considers the *semah* a dance
> That is certainly not his way to perform the ritual prayer.

As Öztürkmen indicates (2001:131), *oyun* is the traditional Turkish term used simultaneously for 'dance' or 'play' which directly refers to traditional forms of folk and social dancing. The verb *oynamak* (lit. 'to dance/to play') primarily refers to established tradition, but it can also indicate the activity of acting, and supplies the root to the word 'actor' (*oyuncu*). However, Thierry Zarcone suggests that the term *oyun* was probably used as the generic term for sacred and Sufi dance in the Ottoman Empire, and should be understood in relation to its intimate link with shamanism proper and, in Turkic Siberia, to Islamised shamanism (2012b:206-

[86] Nonetheless, this was possibly not always the case in the past. The term *raks* seems in fact to have been used to refer to the *semah*s in historical hagiographies of Alevi saints. Communication with anthropologist Mark Soileau helped clarify this point.

208). The term is still used by some Alevi-Bektaşi groups, especially among nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes, such as the Tahtacı and Yürük (ibid.).[87] The insistence of the Alevis that *semah* is not *oyun*, often disregarded in Republican historiography, addresses a claim for its status as a serious and devotional activity; it re-validates the *semah* as a practice that is more akin to the Islamic prayer performed in the mosque (*namaz*) than to the playful character of folk and social dancing.

The most important study that helps understand the changes in these conceptualisations is certainly Fahriye Dinçer's PhD thesis (2004), which systematically analyses accounts associated with the *semah*s since the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923. Through surveying these accounts, found both in oral as well as in written records, Dinçer unpacked processes of construction and reconstruction of Aleviness across the religious, cultural and ethnic spectrum within the Turkish national discourse. Despite not aiming at a structural choreo-morphological analysis, Dinçer's meticulous scrutiny provides an extremely valuable approach to the most common formal changes of the *semah*s until the turn of the millennium. During more than six years of fieldwork research among both Turkish and Kurdish Alevis (especially migrants from the district of Şiran in North-eastern Turkey to Istanbul), Dinçer observed how the *semah*s had been standardised around what she perceived to be a set of 'rules' (2004:339-347). She used this term to refer to a number of main characteristics 'that were repeated in a significant number of narratives, or emphasized with such

[87] Zarcone remarks that in the booklet on Alevi-Bektaşi dances *Gizli Türk Dinî Oyunları* ('The Turkish secret and religious dances', 1941) the folklorist Vahit Lüfti Salcı (1883-1950) frequently used the expression 'to play/dance the sema' (*sema oynamak*), an unusual compound which suggests that the practices meld Sufi and shamanic elements (2012b:208).

terms as *never* and *always*' (2004:339-340). Dinçer characterized four of these rules as enabling Alevi groups to define themselves as 'modern' vis-à-vis their Sunni counterparts, while at the same time protecting the respectability of their practices against prejudice and accusations of immorality:

1) the preference that men and women perform together, rather than in groups of all men or all women (Dinçer 2004:340-342);
2) the necessity that the performers do not touch each other's arms, hands and waist (Dinçer 2004:342-343);
3) the lack of solo forms (Dinçer 2004:343-344);
4) the taboo related to performing the *semah*s without any cloths on, known as *Üryan Semahı* ('Nude Semah') (Dinçer 2004:344).

Other rules were defined instead more as attempts to gain recognition through the standardisation of the ritual practices on a national level:

5) the exclusive use of Turkish language in *semah* contexts, with the exclusion of prayers and *deyiş* performed in Kurdish (Dinçer 2004:345-346);

6) a tendency to name the *semah*s through reference to administrative and geographical units rather than the *ocak*s or other forms of linguistic or tribal affiliation (Dinçer 2004:346);

7) the lack of improvised forms (Dinçer 2004:346-347);

The observations made by Dinçer are especially important in order to appreciate the artistic adaptations of the *semah* on the stage. As we will see throughout the discussion of three case studies in the second part of the thesis, whereas some of these theatrical and choreographic projects conformed to most of the above rules,

other projects aimed at their conscious transgression, in more multifaceted attempts at adaptation.

If Dinçer's thesis was limited to addressing textual accounts related to the *semah* throughout the history of the Republic, recent trends in Alevi historiography provide fresh textual material that may be examined to reassess the historicity and changes of functions and bodily forms beyond that historical framework. Exploring the as yet insufficiently studied Alevi literary canon, these trends enable us to investigate these ritual forms before the Republican period, and sometimes in contradiction of a nationalist discourse. Over recent years, scholars such as Ayfer Karakaya-Stump (2008), Rıza Yıldırım (2011), Janina Karolewski (2015) and Zeynep Oktay Uslu (2017) among others, reconsidered the relevance and use of these written sources in Alevi history, challenging the rather widespread assumption according to which Alevi cultures intrinsically relied on oral, rather than on textual, methods of cultural transmission.

References to the *semah* body movements are in fact mentioned in the written record that refers to the ritual practices of historical groups considered to be the 'ancestors' of contemporary Alevis, such as the *Bektaşi*s, *Kızılbaş* or *Abdal* of Rum. Even though it would be problematic to attribute a genealogy of the movement structures found within contemporary Alevi rituals from those found in these historical accounts, it is still useful to assemble such references in the written record of the ritual practices of these groups. Such a genealogy would include information contained within several sources. To start with, several editions of the scarcely studied Alevi liturgical texts, popularly called *Buyruk,* offer information about mythical narratives related to the *semah*, such as the one on the *Kırklar Meclisi* which was already discussed in the previous section. These narratives can

be analysed to suggest tentative functions and morphologies that the *semah*s may have had at the time of the fixing of these texts in writing. More than mythical narratives however, these texts also offer also details of bodily postures enacted during the rituals, for instance as reported in English translation by Janina Karowleski (2015:96-97).[88] Even though a systematic study of these texts is yet to be accomplished, one of the leading scholars engaged in their scrutiny, Rıza Yıldırım (2011) has highlighted their strong resemblance to the *Fütüvvet-names* and claimed that over the late fifteen and early sixteenth century the ritual prescriptions included therein may have been borrowed from the rituals of the now extinguished Ahi order.

Information about the body and its movements is also contained in the hagiographies of Hacı Bektaş Veli, such as the narrative of the *Hırka Dağı* contained in the publication of the *Vilayetname-i Hacı Bektaş Veli*, which first appeared at the end of the fifteenth century and was edited in the Latin alphabet by Abdulbaki Gölpınarlı in 1958 (Dinçer 2014:487–89). The hagiographies of other historical figures revered by Alevi groups today are also a valuable source. Some of these figures, such as Kaygusuz Abdal, also produced exquisite literary compositions in Turkish vernacular which have only recently started to be systematically analysed. Zeynep Oktay Uslu's PhD thesis (2017) assesses several manuscripts produced in Turkish vernacular by Kaygusuz Abdal and his successors in the fourteenth and fifteenth century, offering an English translation and critical edition of one of his as yet unstudied literary works, *The Book of Prattle* (Kitāb-ı Maġlaṭa). Even more precious, is the study of another of the three literary

[88] Karowleski offered a description of an *ayn-i cem* ritual as presented in the manuscript belonging to Dede Hüseyin Dedekargınoğlu, member of the Dede Garkın Ocağı (alternatively called Dede Karkın Ocağı).

works produced in prose by Kaygusuz Abdal, the *Vücūd-nāme*.[89] Directly dealing with the human body and its relationship with the various constituents of the universe as well as with the letters in the Arabic alphabet (Oktay 2017:15), the text also provides a mapping of the human body into twelve body parts, each associated with one of the twelve constellations of the zodiac (for instance, the head being associated with the constellation of Aries, the hands with Gemini, the feet with Pisces etc.).

The association of body parts with elements of the zodiac is found also in *Bektaşi* iconographies which represent the *İnsan-i Kamil*, the 'Perfect Man/Woman', through pictorial as well as calligraphic elements. One of the fundamentals beliefs in Alevi doctrines (i.e. Clarke 1999:11), the *İnsan-i Kamil* theory outlines an esoteric model for human perfectibility which is embodied by persons, such as Ali, Haci Bektaş Veli, and the saintly oral poets (*ulu ozanlar*). Such an attainment is reached by passing through the four doors (*dört kapı*) and forty stations (*kırk makam*) which mark spiritual progress along the Alevi path, leading to spiritual maturity and the becoming one with the Divine (*Hak*).[90] The pictorial and textual signifiers encapsulated in some of these images, for instance those displayed in the Hacıbektaş mausoleum (fig. 5 and 6), present the whole

[89] Güzel (1983:135-152) offers an edition of the *Vücūd-nāme* in modern Turkish.

[90] Such an attainment is reached by passing through the four doors (*dört kapı*) and forty stations (*kırk makam*) which mark spiritual progress along the Alevi path. Kreger reads the concept of *İnsan-I Kamil* through Foucault's notion of ethical self-formation (2016:27). Oktay specifies that, despite being the centre of his teaching, Kaygusuz Abdal does not consecrate much of his time to defining the *İnsan-I Kamil*. This is sometimes referred to as 'the esoteric (*batın*) or the soul (*can*) of the universe' and 'manifestation of God's Attributes', whose 'heart is the abode of God' and whose 'body is a microcosmos which mirrors the universe'. In another work, the *Delīl-i Budalā*, Kaygusuz compares man's body to a city, whose upper half 'consists of the seven heavens and the throne' and whose 'lower half consists of the seven layers below ground, the ox, the sea, and the fish' (Oktay 2017:90).

cosmos as a projection of man. In analysing *Bektaşi* iconography, Frederick De Jong explained such a cosmology by emphasizing:

> (…) the potential for truth and perfection is present in every human being, since God (Muhammad – 'Ali) is present in all beings, in every animate and inanimate object. In the human face and body the signs of the divine presence are outwardly manifest as the shapes of various Arabic letters; these are the best of form, because they were used to write down the revelation. (De Jong 1992:229)

These iconographies were certainly influenced by Horufism, a series of antinomian and incarnationist doctrines evolved by Astarabadi over the fourteenth century which theorised complex numerological interpretations of the letters of the Perso-Arabic alphabet and their correlation with the human body, and more specifically the human face. Calligraphy would thus provide access to decoding divine hidden meanings dispersed in the world and in man. Such iconographies thus offer important pathways for accessing the representation of the body and codifying meanings associated with it in Alevi aesthetics.[91] They exhibit a very peculiar combination of figurative and calligraphic elements with the intent of tackling an esoteric graphical mapping of the human body, which embraces elements of the Bektaşi dogmas as well as mythologies associated with the Zodiac.

Figure 5. A representation of the *İnsan-i Kamil*. Photo by Sinibaldo De Rosa taken at the Mausoleum in Hacibektaş during the festivities in August 2015 (following page).

[91] In fact, the use of calligraphy in these Bektaşi iconographies differs in significant ways from the one found in other Islamic contexts, such as the one discussed by Shay (1999a).

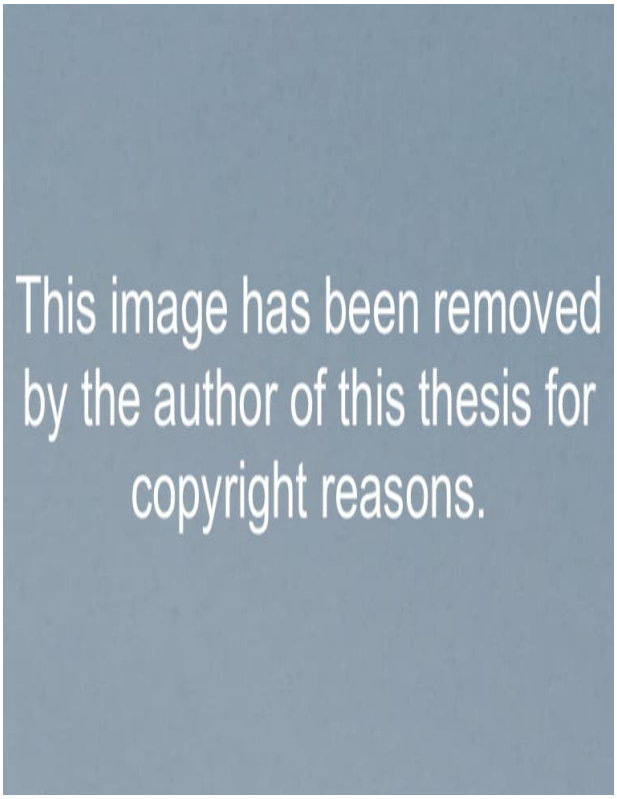
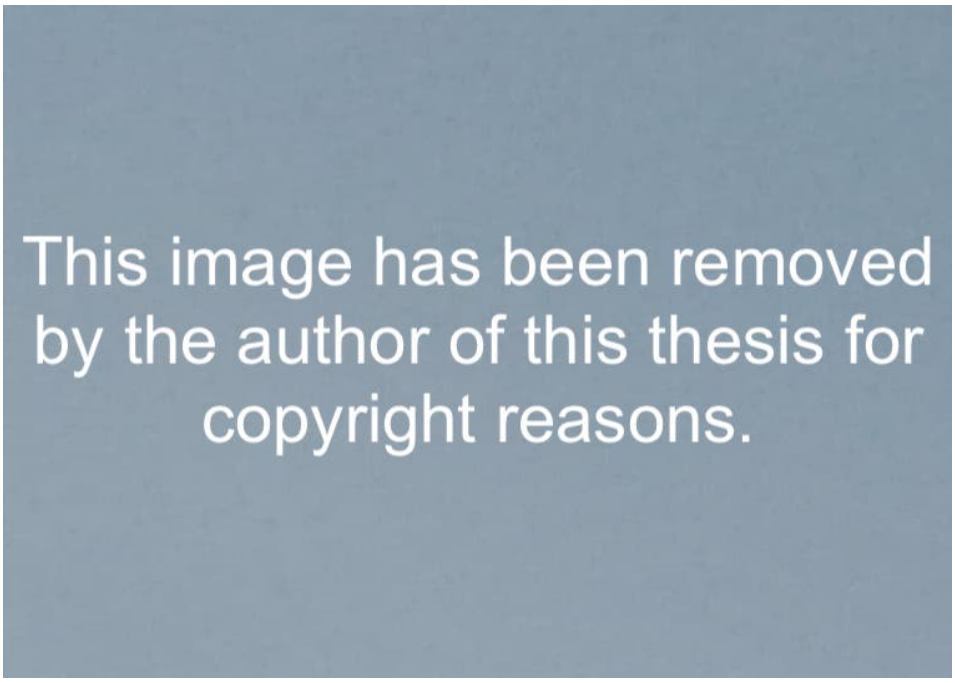


Figure 6. Calligraphy representing the idea of the presence of the divine in the face of a Bektaşi baba. Photo by Sinibaldo De Rosa taken at the Mausoleum in Hacibektaş during the festivities in August 2015.



Historical information about the *semah*s within the rituals can also be found in historical accounts written by outside observers of the Ottoman Empire. In his in-depth analysis of the development of antinomian dervish groups in Medieval Anatolia, Ahmet Karamustafa (1994:156–172) analysed information produced by European observers early in the sixteenth century, also examining the presence of expressive forms of worship including music and movement sessions (here written *sama'*) within the rituals of the *Abdāl*s of *Rūm*. For this purpose, he referred to manuscripts by Konstantin Michailovic (1455–1463), Giovan Antonio Menavino (1548), Nicolas de Nicolay Daulphinoys (1576), Vahidi (1522) and other Ottoman sources. For instance, Menavino signposted the existence of round dances, performed by men and women together while holding each other's hands in a circle around a great fire and singing praises to the order (Karamustafa 1994:161).

Comparison of Menavino's account with the 'rules' that Dinçer observed at the turn of the 2000s shows that elements of continuity between the *semah*s of the sixteenth-century Abdals and those of the contemporary Alevis may be limited to the fact that both involve some sort of circular path and gender mingling, whereas divergences start with the different codes of physical contact that they display as well as the presence or lack of a central fire around which the circling is executed. Moreover, whereas in the historical record the *semah*s of the Abdals are often reported in association with hashish consumption, self-scarification and deviant sexual practices (i.e. Karamustafa 1994:71), these elements do not subsist in the *semah* public performances of the Alevis discussed by Dinçer, nor in those I experienced during fieldwork.

3.6 Alevi professionalisation in the performing arts

Reference to performance theories, relevant literature and ethnographic insight, provides a framework to understand how Alevi rituals and Alevi staged performances may be suitably understood in a continuum rather than as two conceptually distinct types of phenomena. Because of the performative qualities which these types of social events share, both rituals and staged performances constitute in fact contextual instances through which over the last three decades Alevi memory was transmitted and Alevi communities were reproduced. As we have seen, Langer's 'transfer of ritual' theory has proved useful in establishing relations between contexts differentiated by significant socio-political changes and transformations of the actual ritual performances. Nonetheless, what remains unaddressed in this theoretical framework are questions related to the changes that ritual performances undergo when they are forced beyond their ritual frameworks and adapted into other sorts of social events. In other words, whereas Langer has been concerned with understanding how processes such as migration, transnationalism and technological developments affected change in the ritual forms, the issue that concerns me here has more to do with how such processes contributed to re-contextualise and move the ritual forms towards more secular contexts, and more specifically, the theatre stage.

As I have indicated, a tendency towards professionalisation has influenced the way Alevi ritual duties have been performed. For instance, Langer explained the professionalisation of the *semahcı*s, now occupied by 'official' dance troupes who rehearse and wear especially designed costumes, as a strategy for the youngsters within the communities to gain agency within the rituals. On the other hand, the institution of the *dede* is also getting more and more professionalised, a

process that Langer understood as part of the restructuring of privilege within the communities, and that Dressler has explained as a 'secularisation' of the *dede*'s role. As we have seen, this is reflected in the fact that several publicly influential ritual officers embodied and encouraged a professionalisation in the performing arts within the rituals.

In order to understand the broader socio-cultural results of this professionalisation within Alevi rituals, it is important to identity the ways in which this professionalism is made manifest. By referring to professionalism in the performing arts, I indicate a skilled domain of human production which fosters artistic expression through the use of the body and in relation to an audience, although I do not imply that such a competency always and necessarily results in the generation of greater income. In this understanding of the term, I follow Ali Keleş and Öznür Doğan (2014), who conducted fieldwork research in the context of Alevi *semah* trainings in two ritual contexts in Istanbul (the Karacaahmet *semah* team, attached to the homonymous Bektashi shrine in Üsküdar, and the Şahkulu Sultan Dergahı in Göztepe). In their words:

> Professionalization (…) does not refer to payment made in exchange for the performance. Rather, it means teamwork under the supervision of an instructor, rehearsals, choreography (figures determined in detail), stylized costumes and attributing importance to professionalism. These concepts can only be observed in professional semah groups. In addition, these semah groups aim for a public, theatrical performance, unlike the ritualistic practice. (Keleş and Doğan 2014:141)

The professionalisation in the performance of the *semah*s investigated by Keleş and Doğan is representative of wider rearrangements of the practice which certainly started with shifts towards the folklorisation, modernisation and secularisation of the practice already investigated by Öztürkmen (2005) and Dinçer

(2004) (see discussion in 3.5). Keleş and Doğan noticed however how the care with which such troupes prepare the execution of the *semah*s in view of public theatrical displays, now depends also on the presence of *semah* instructors, often themselves trained in Music, Theatre and Dance Departments or State Conservatories. These instructors provide the groups with the competence necessary for supervising the preparation of choreographic displays in way that more or less successfully reproduce the standards and methods proposed by state-sponsored folk dance companies, such as those investigated by Anthony Shay (2002). In fact, whereas Shay remarked that 'minority groups are neither recognized by the government nor included in the repertoire of their respective folk dance companies' (2002:5), such groups are nonetheless capable of appropriating some of the canons of those official folk dance companies for their own needs. Without any doubt, the most striking difference in the ways such state-sponsored companies and peripheral groups operates depends on the very different financial support which they receive from the government as well as to the different place that is given to a monetary profit for their displays.

The understanding of professionalism discussed by Keleş and Doğan applies to the contexts within which I participated in *semah* and *bağlama* classes as will be detailed in Chapter 4, but also in the context of artistic projects which will be discussed in the case studies presented in the second part of the thesis. Even though most of the key performers with whom I researched are skilled professionals, a monetary profit did often not constitute an incentive, nor a result, for their labour in such projects. For this reason, the productions that I analysed did not constitute the primary source of income for their producers as they rarely guaranteed a revenue that would be enough to earn a living, if these provided a

remuneration at all. Instead, these constituted projects for which their makers bestowed their professionalism on a completely or almost completely voluntary basis, for reasons which preclude the financially precarious conditions of working in the performing arts or prospects of career advancement. Moreover, the type of social commitment that these artistic projects seem to display is not sufficiently explained by the familial, religious or spiritual attachments of their makers, and it did not enable a marketisation of Aleviness for the demands of the entertainment industry.

When delineating an overarching appraisal of the ways in which the professionalism in Alevi rituals has been established in conjunction with artistic professionalisation on a wider public level, it is tempting to hypothesise that the Alevis became typically disposed to become professional performers out of the acquaintance with some kind of performative 'savoir-faire' which they learnt through participation into the activities of the *cemevi*s since childhood. Several Alevi actors and dancers whom I met during fieldwork acknowledged their early participation in the rituals, sometimes emphasising how children are regarded in these contexts as holding an equal status to the adults. For instance, this is what Yeşim Coşkun, a founding member of *Mesopotamya Dans*, an Istanbul-based contemporary dance group which engages with issues of Kurdish epics, identity and gender struggles, told me in a recorded interview in April 2018. Coşkun conceived the choreography of *4 Kapı 40 Makam* (lit. '4 Doors 40 Stations') (Istanbul, 2011) after her yearning to retrieve the teachings she was exposed to during childhood through her participation in the crowded society of the *cemevi*s in Istanbul, and which she then lost while growing up. Similarly, in an interview with the dancer Gizem Aksu for the theatre journal *Memesis*, Coşkun affirmed:

> We (as a generation), born in Istanbul, inside such a big metropolis, become easily lost in our lives. But in my childhood, until I became 9 or 10 years old, I used to spend all the weekends in the *cemevi*s. They (my parents) used to bring us (my siblings and me) there to learn that culture… and they had to force us a bit. They then succeeded however, and I grew up with a group of children who were connected to the *cemevi* and who used to hang out there every weekend. But this remains within me as a scar, because while growing up, I had to break away from that context. When I became 10 years old, because of the school and other problems, we started to hang out in other environments, and I got lost into life. Finally (with this piece) I wanted to take out that Alevi sphere and that part of me that somehow rested within me. (my translation from Aksu and Çoşkun 2011)

In the *cemevi*s that I was able to visit, many of the activities offered are intended for the education of the youth in the communities, and most commonly centred around the conviction that their training in music and dance is of primary importance. Such activities do not only include training in skills which are directly relevant to guarantee their involvement in the rituals and thus in their overall acculturation into Aleviness, such as playing the *bağlama* or turning the *semah*. Training activities also involve the learning of other expressive skills, such as education in other musical instruments (most commonly the guitar), chorus singing, Turkish traditional dancing and acting. During my ethnographically informed involvement into the life of the *cemevi* in Dalston, East London, between 2015 and 2017, when I took part in both *semah* and *bağlama* classes, destined equally for adults, teenagers or children, I often encountered the extremely gifted and practiced talent of many of the children, especially in playing the *bağlama*.

The fact that acculturation into Alevi ritual life nurtures the education of expressive skills may have contributed to a more organic fostering of performance professionalism beyond the ritual context. Nonetheless, the assumption that the Alevis are more inclined to perform because of the highly performative character of their ritual has its shortcomings since, as we had seen with Beeman (2013), all

religious rituals have a performative character. In performative terms, what makes the *cem* different from other practices, such as the prayer at the mosque (*namaz*) or the limited physical gesturing during the Catholic mass? It would be tempting to suggest that the more improvisational character fostered by the structuring of the ritual into twelve dramatic services, or the centrality of the *semah*s as harmonised group circular body movements accompanied by music, may contribute to such an interrelation. Nonetheless, the secrecy and marginality with which the rituals subsisted could have lead the Alevi in the opposite direction, creating greater difficulties in achieving public success and performing on the stage.[92] To explain this situation, this thesis pursues and articulates the hypothesis that such performing arts platforms sprung out of a robust form of civic commitment, which found its *raison d'être* in the fostering of both national and transnational transmission, (re)production and diffusion of an otherwise silenced Alevi memory. Remarkably, the creators of these performing arts works were not always born into an Alevi family, nor was their commitment to fostering Alevi memory anchored in an involvement in Alevi ritual and doctrinal milieus. In other words, scrutiny of the work of Alevi performing artists testify how, both in Turkey as well as abroad, the performing arts have in fact largely responded, and often compensated, for the state apparatuses' neglect and hindrance of a genuine recognition of Aleviness, which operated across the Alevi-non-Alevi spectrum. attitudes

[92] John Morgan O'Connell (1991) has interpreted the layers in the Berliner Alevi *aşık* Şah Turna's attitude to music and performance as reflecting a broader Alevi characteristic in political public conformity and private non-conformity.

3.7 *Semah* public visibility

The fact that performance professionalism is devoid from economic revenue points to important caveats on the embedment of Alevi cultures in the national discourse, a topic which has often been misunderstood in academic literature. This is the case for instance in an article by Kabir Tambar first published in 2010 and then reframed to be included in his monograph (2014) which should be considered here. In his persuasive discussion of the tensions that have arisen over the issue of religious pluralism in Turkey, Tambar pays attention to how public enactments of the *semah* contributed to shaping a reformulated Alevi visibility, which could be 'palatable and often pleasurable to a national audience' (2014:78). This visibility was at the same time encouraged by several state agencies, political parties and news medias as a strategy to claim back recognitions of Alevi difference, while at the same time it was ambiguously perceived by many Alevi interlocutors as complicit to what Tambar calls 'statist imaginings of the nations' (ibid.). In understanding Alevi public performances as a 'species of entertainment and leisure for the national viewing public' (ibid.), Tambar stresses how the *semah* and communal public renderings of Alevi rituals, 'incorporate(d) the community into the rhythms and gestures of national spectacle' (ibid). This leads him to read the visibility of the Alevis on the national public scene within broader political and economic liberalisation processes started in the 1980s, hence to focus on the incongruities between different discourses about the *cem*'s ritual status, and the place of *semah* enactments within and beyond it.

This understanding of *semah* enactments as entertainment and leisure misunderstands the political role of performance and leads Tambar to some puzzling misrepresentations, which may be due to the lack of an embodied and

reflexive approach in participating in the bodily articulations of Aleviness during fieldwork research. As well as reporting an ethnographic account about one *cem* ritual into which the *dede* reprimanded the participants, accentuating that the 'cem is a form of worship', and not 'a stage for the performance of folklore' (2014:97), Tambar also tracked down performances by *semah* troupes in a number of different locations, such as in summer village festivals or during the opening of a grocery store. The latter anecdote, in which the owner of the market does not abstain from blatantly asserting that the *semah* troupe has been hired to generate publicity, thus summoning 'a public of costumers unmarked by sectarian affiliation' (ibid.), is at the same time peculiar and in some ways perplexing. I need to admit that the detail misled me during the early stages of my ethnographic fieldwork, as it led me to assume that the *semah*s were now widely visible and accessible, while being adapted for flagrant marketing purposes, something that I have not found to be substantiated in my later research.

On the contrary, my alertness to performance scholarship and the political and artistic significance of the different performing arts projects which I investigated, compelled me to problematise the very character of the visibility of Alevi rituals. In fact, these seem to suggest that an unsophisticated understanding of 'spectacle' as entertainment and leisure, emptied of a preoccupation for the lived experience, motivations and interpretations of the actor engaged in the performance, is not enough to unpack the complexity of the visibility which is at stake. Moreover, the visibility of the Alevi rituals which I discerned, despite at times advertised on media channels or the internet, seemed to be most often projected internally within the Alevi community itself, or eventually to a rather tight-knit circle of Alevi sympathisers and researchers. These professionalised public

performances of Aleviness seemed to aim at an affirmation of the Alevi community for the sake of that community itself, or to prove its capacity to display and enact a certain grandeur, which nonetheless often remained unnoticed to wider national and international audiences. The case of the mega-event *Doğa Aşkına* analysed in Chapter 6 is especially revelatory of such an invisibility. In other words, I suggest that such professionalised public events, despite inciting and targeting national and international visibility, often disguised much more complex projects of suppressing, ghettoizing, and concealing, regardless of the scale and prominence of the stage upon which they are enacted.

Most importantly, however, Tambar does not balance attentiveness to such instances of visible Alevi rituals with the appropriate consideration for the highly invested bodily and emotional commitment with which most of Alevi actors and organisations understand their engagement in these commemorative practices. Accordingly, the scant attention paid to the Sivas 'incident' in Tambar's monograph is revealing: the event is mentioned only for its capacity to generate annual rallies where large crowds of supporters gather in contrast to the more sober and unadvertised appeal of the rituals of mourning during the month of Muharram on which his focus is accorded (Tambar 2014:45).[93] These ambiguities seem to signpost how much ethnographers who worked on Alevi cultures have more often taken the role of observing as 'spectators' in their fieldwork, rather than engaging in reflections on the relevance of their embodied participation with the interlocutors in shaping their research.

[93] *Muharrem* indicates the month during which the Alevis, as well as Shia muslim, fast in remembrance of the murder of Huseyin.

3.8 Conclusions

Adopting an approach intersecting ethnography of ritual, movement and performance, in this chapter I highlighted the contexts and structures of the *ayn-i cem* rituals within which the Alevi *semah*s are typically embedded. The chapter has illustrated elements of professionalisation within Alevi ritual practices, both integral to and beyond the ritual context. In this way, I have expanded Robert Langer's 'ritual transfer' theory by exploring how Alevi rituals have been transferred beyond the religious dimension and adapted within secular frameworks as part of staged performing arts projects.

In this chapter, I examined how qualities characterising both ritual and performance, such as 'flow' and 'framing', are useful in understanding the ways in which devotees interact and participate in the *ayn-i cem*. In fact, these qualities helped to highlight in which sense music and movement sustain the expression of sorrowful emotions during the ritual, as well as the modalities through which twelve chosen appointees enact twelve symbolic services (*oniki hizmet*) in these contexts. Usually a male member of a priestly lineage (*ocak*), the *dede* embodies the most prominent of these twelve services and takes responsibility for the overall running of the ritual. I thus overviewed the tasks that the *dede* typically performs to guarantee a climate of consensus (*rızalık*) among the participants and reinstate the cohesiveness of the group, such as establishing kinship ties (*musâhiplik*), arbitrating disputes (*görgü*) or expelling faulty community members (*düşkünlük*). By referring to exemplary figures such as Dertli Divani and Ali Haydar Celasun who over recent decades have undertaken professional work in the music and theatre sectors whilst also taking on the role of *dede* within the Alevi communities, in this

chapter I highlighted the ways in which this role has increasingly become enmeshed with elements of performance professionalisation.

A paradigm based on performance has also been used to highlight how these ritual actions may serve to foster a narrative of equality while at the same time obfuscating elements of inequality in Alevi cultures, especially in relation to gender roles. Accordingly, the chapter paid attention to the place of female ritual leaders (*ana*s) in Alevi cultures by reviewing recent scholarly feminist critiques which assessed the tensions between the ideal representation of equality and the gendered nature of ritual practices. The mingling of men and women which characterises most of the *semah*s over the last decades has often been used to emphasise such elements of gender equality. To assess elements of continuity and rupture in the way gender has been performed through movement, I thus overviewed some of the most frequently recurring textual narratives related to the practice throughout the Republican period and within current trends in Alevi historiography.

Understanding Alevi rituals and staged performances of Aleviness in a continuum, finally I shifted the focus to the work of Alevi performing artists and performing arts projects which engaged with Alevi themes. Both rituals and staged projects have been understood as eventful instances through which over the last three decades Alevi memory has been transmitted and Alevi communities have been reproduced. Professionalisation in the performing arts within both religious and secular Alevi events was explored by raising questions about the role played by early participation in rituals for the training of Alevi performing artists, as well as on the civic type of commitment which these theatrical projects display. I thus argued that attention to the political and artistic significance of professional

performing arts projects does not only shed light on how Alevi identity may be socially constructed, but it also problematised the simplistic understanding of Alevi visibility. Moving beyond an unsophisticated understanding of ‘spectacle’ as entertainment and leisure, the chapter addressed the need for engaging with the lived experiences, motivations and interpretations of the actors occupied in such performances to better unpack the complexity of processes of recognition and misrecognition of Aleviness.

4. Performing critical Kinetography in the context of the Alevi *semah*s

4.1 Introduction

A clear understanding of the morphological aspects of the *semah*s is needed to appreciate how these ritual practices were adapted in staged performances over the last three decades. As a structured movement system, the *semah*s are characterized by recognizable formal aspects which make them different from other forms of kinetic activities. More than the reading of relevant literature, my knowledge of their morphologies depends on me witnessing them in person and learning throughout several ritual, civic and artistic contexts during ethnographic fieldwork. This experiential knowledge was however shaped by studies in dance anthropology and my training in a specific movement notation system, the Kinetography Laban. Wishing to reflect critically on how the methodology used influenced my perception and understanding, in this chapter I aim at answering the following research questions:

- What are the most recurring *semah* morphologies that I encountered throughout fieldwork and what strategies did I use to document them?

- How did I perform the role of ethnographer and kinetographer during fieldwork? In what ways my competence in a movement notation tool defined my positionality as a researcher?

- Differently than through the Kinetography Laban, how have the *semah*s been kinetically analysed before me in the past?

In this chapter, I define the procedural style applied throughout fieldwork research as 'critical Kinetography'. With it, I try to circumvent a simplistic dichotomy

of resorting to the Kinetography as the scientific/etic method *for researching* and the *semah* as the esotic/emic matter *to be researched*. More than the mere purpose of documenting, describing and analysing, approaching the Kinetography with a productive methodological scepticism has enabled me to resort to it as a fertile apparatus for thinking through epistemological questions on the *semah* as a coherent system of kinetic knowledge. 'Critical Kinetography' meant prompting a dialogue between the *semah* practices and the Laban methods as two self-sufficient and articulate systems of kinetic knowledge. Reflecting on how using a movement notation tool defined my positioning as a researcher during fieldwork, in this chapter I will remain attentive to the way I performed the role of ethnographer and kinetographer throughout the research. Exposing the methodological challenges and opportunities of conducting and documenting ethnographic fieldwork research about a ritual body movement system throughout several emic contexts, this chapter wishes thus to be useful for other scholars who may engage in 'kinetic fieldwork' and in analytical challenges akin to mine. After detailing my ethnographic journey and the benefits and pitfalls of having a movement notation system available in my methodological toolkit, the chapter will provide descriptions of some of the most recurring *semah* morphologies encountered. More generally, this discussion reflects on the necessity and modalities of discussing body movement in the humanities and social sciences. Touching upon several methodological tendencies, it examines the use of movement notation in anthropology and performance.

Because movement notation systems 'can suggest how the body is conceptualized, how its movement is appraised, and then how bodily movement is to be represented' (Tomko 1991:1), I tried to gain an awareness of their use in

Middle Eastern, Central Asian and more specifically in Turkish and Alevi contexts. In his discussion of improvised solo dance performance in an Iranian-Islamic context, Anthony Shay (1999a) has approached the role of calligraphy and its relationship to body movement as part of a larger system of aesthetic expression in Middle Eastern traditions. Exploration of dance's morphological affinities with calligraphy in terms of rhythm, movement and flow sustained the hypothesis that the two share very similar geometric creative impulses despite their very different social status, the first seen as 'a highly-esteemed, almost sacred art form' (Shay 1999a:50) and the second as 'an earthy performative expression that is often perceived in a negative way' (ibid.). These two areas of artistic expression rarely collaborated, and this may be a reason why after initial mapping of the topic, I had to realize that movement notation systems are scarcely used in the Middle East and in relation to Middle Eastern traditions.[94] As we have seen in the previous chapter however, the use of Arabic calligraphy in Bektaşi iconographies differs from the one found in other Middle Eastern contexts. Calligraphy is used here also pictorially to represent ideas of perfection in the human body and face, and convey esoteric meanings associated to the letters of the alphabet and the cosmos through representation of the constellations of the Zodiac (see 3.5). Even though these visual representations do not seem to provide kinetic information, they are not too different from notation systems in their intention of tackling a mapping of the human

[94] Notations of dances from this area of which I am aware are limited. Rickey Holden and William Reynolds (1975) used the Kinetography Laban to document several Armenian folk dances which I could consult when Rickey Holden received me in his house in Brussels in January 2015. In Malasya, Anis Mohd Nor used Labanotation to document several dances with an Islamic background, such as the *Randai* dance of Minangkabau, Sumatra, and the Zapin Melayu dance of Johor (1990). Still using Labanotation, more recently, Sonja Hinz compiled a detailed study on dance and mysticism in Tajikistan (2007). In 2014, using the Kinetography Laban, Nasim Eslami Lootij (2014) documented a Ghaéni dance from Iranian Khorasan as performed by 'Ava-yé Ghahestan' Folkloric dance group.

body in graphic symbolism.

In the Turkish context, the system that was and is still used the most to document body movements is Benesh Movement Notation.[95] Its adoption was dependent on its promotion in England by Madame Ninette de Valois.[96] Already head of the Sadler's Wells School in London, de Valois was invited to establish the Turkish State Ballet School in 1947.[97] In 1962, de Valois arranged a British Council Scholarship for a ballerina in that school, Suna Eden Şenel, to learn the Benesh notation system from their inventors Rudolph and Joan Benesh at the Royal Ballet in London. Şenel thus started teaching the Benesh system in Turkey, contributing to its larger use in this country. The use of Laban systems in quite rare in Turkey. In the early 1960s in the United States however, Akdik Ergi documented through basic Labanotation scores a few folk Turkish dances (1961). Even though the systematic study of Labanotation or Kinetography Laban has not yet been introduced, some choreographers and scholars, such as Sungu Okan or Şelçuk Göldere, are currently pursuing its study abroad. In December 2016, through the organisation of prof. Belma Kurtişoğlu, I offered an introductory workshop on the Kinetography Laban at the Department of Turkish Folk Dances of Istanbul

[95] In this discussion, I do not approach the complex issues related to the adoption of western notation throughout the Ottoman and Turkish history. Greve (2015) offers a rich source to be consulted on this matter. For discussion on the promotion of western notation by Giuseppe Donizzetti against the use of *Hamparsun notası*, an Armenian system of music notation current until the 19th century, and for more references on the history of music notation in Turkey, see O'Connell (2010) and Ayangil (2010).

[96] Even though de Valois had initially made plans for the adoption of Labanotation in the formation of dancers at the Sadler's Wells School in London (see Hutchinson Guest 2012), nationality may have influenced her final choice of promoting Benesh in the attempt to establish a purely British system of notation. Penman and Watts (2012:127) remark how such choice contributed to the current disunited field of dance notation.

[97] Richard Glasstone (2012:144), who assisted de Valois's throughout what he called her 'Turkish adventure' and 'miracle', reported how the British Foreign Office was always anxious to support her involvement in the Turkish dance sector as part of a strategy to contrast the cultural influence of Soviet Russia there. For a chronology of de Valois's engagement in Turkey see also Başar (2018).

Technical University. An interesting development of movement notation in Turkey is the invention by Sönay Ödemiş of the *Hareket Portesi Notasyon Systemi* (HPNS), a system first conceived for the analysis of *Zeybek* dances (2016).

Due to the paramount centrality that movement has in Alevi aesthetic cultures, documentation of specific body postures in the *semah*s through photographs and drawings is not rare (i.e. Ersal 2011, Aydoğmuş 2012). At least two scholars before me, Belgin Aygün and Nasuh Barın, felt the necessity of documenting the movements also with notation tools. Before detailing a brief overview of some recurring *semah* movement morphologies through the Kinetography Laban, I should thus relate about these two previous successful approaches in the *semah*s' kinetic analysis. The first was achieved through a 'self-made' notation system by Aygün Belgin in 1982; the other used Benesh notation and was published by Nasuh Barın in a dossier on the journal *Nefes* in 1993. These two kinetic analyses reveal the extent to which the documentation of the practices responded to political more than purely archival purposes. Scholars who produced studies about the *semah*s in musicology such as Uludemir (1995), lamented the fact that even though during fieldwork, information on the music was always conveyed also through participation in the movements, the lack of proficiency in movement notation hindered their documentation in writing. In sharp contrast to the large popularity that some Alevi tunes and songs gain in the 1980s and 1990s, in the early 1990s Martin Stokes remarked how the steps of the *semah* were 'not known at all outside of Alevi communities' (1996). Whilst Alevi ritual music had been promoted by an elite of professional musicians formerly associated with the Turkish Radio and Television (see Markoff 1986a), the same fate did not occur for the movements since dancers and choreographers did not engage with the Alevi

semah as a resource for their work. Nonetheless, the approaches to the kinetic dimensions of the *semah*s and the rituals testified by Aygün's and Barın's approaches, attest the attempts of scholars engaged in performing artistry to work on the *semah*s' documentation and scripturalization. The dissemination of these scores among a larger audience of Alevis and non-Alevis, and especially among scholarly and performing arts workers, was certainly undertaken as a contribution to the Alevi cause. Before moving on to discuss my own experience and the movement morphologies I analysed, I will thus briefly review these two earlier approaches in the following sections.

4.2 Belgin Aygün's movement diagrams

The first documentation of the *semah*s through a notation tool was made by Belgin Aygün in the first appendix to the already mentioned dissertation defended in 1982 at the Theatre Department of Ankara University. The other appendixes to the dissertation included musical notations of three *semah*s (the ubiquitous *Gine Dertli İniliyorsun*, *Sabahın Yar Seher Vaktinde*, *Yüce Dağ Başında Bir Goyun Meler*, all retrieved from the Repertoire published by the *TRT Müzik Dairesi*) as well as photographs of ritual actions. As indicated in their captions, these were taken during rituals in the regions of Eskişehir, İsparta and Ankara, and illustrate some of the elements of the ritual overviewed throughout the dissertation, especially pointing to some of the twelve services, bodily postures and *semah*s enacted during the rituals.[98]

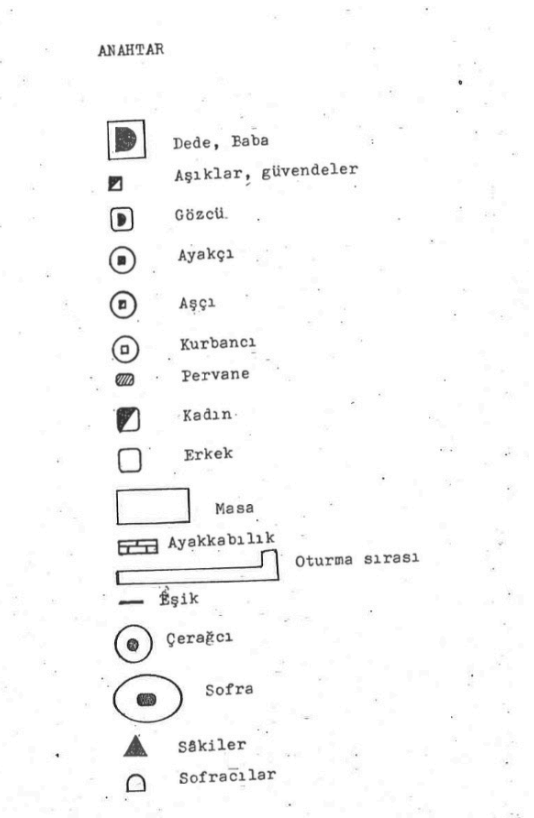
[98] The 16 pictures illustrate an image of the kitchen during the preparation of the *lokma*, a *dede* blessing the ritual drinks and the services performed by the *gözcü*, the *çerağçı*, the *süpürgeci* (here referred to as *carcı*). The semah that are illustrated in the pictures are: *Baba Semahı* (with details of: a woman tying up a lace around a man's chest; the slow section, *ağırlaması*; the *semahcılar* as they standing in the *dar* position; the

The first appendix includes four diagrams conceived by Aygün herself, offering an aerial perspective on four of the ritual actions performed during the *ayn-i cem* rituals into which she had participated. These diagrams were accompanied by visual keys that help identify the role and gender of the participants and the objects included therein (fig. 7). The diagrams do not depict movements as such but only fixed configurations which are designed on the floor plans. The movements are indicated through the arrows drawn in them enabling the reader to perceive spatial changes in time.

The first diagram (fig. 8) illustrates movements performed during the entrance of the devotees into the *cemevi*, their offering of prayers to the threshold and to the *dede*, and their seating in a specifically gendered spatial organisation. Such movements are hence articulated: one side of the room is occupied by the *dede*, who is surrounded, both on his left and on his right, by few other men; a wide space in front of him (the *meydan*) is left open; male devotees occupy the right side of the room, and women occupy the left side; the *ayakçı*, as a handyman, and the *kurbancı*, in charge of preparing the sacrificial animal which would be eaten during the communal meal at the end of the ceremony, sit on the back right corner of the space; people providing the music, denoted here as *aşık* and *güvende*, sit in a separated area among the men; a shoe cabinet (*ayakkabılık*), a table (*masa*) and one extra seating area are fitted in the entrance room, accommodating the *pervane* who will whirl the *semah*.

closing prayers to the *dede*), a *semah* from Eskişehir and one from Ankara for women only, a *semah* from İsparta for men only with an image documenting two men tying up a lace around two other men's chest (an all-male occurrence which I never witnessed during fieldwork and I assume may have become less frequent over the last decades). Finally, two images illustrate collective standings in the *dar* position with a group standing on a line, each *semahcı* embracing the person next.

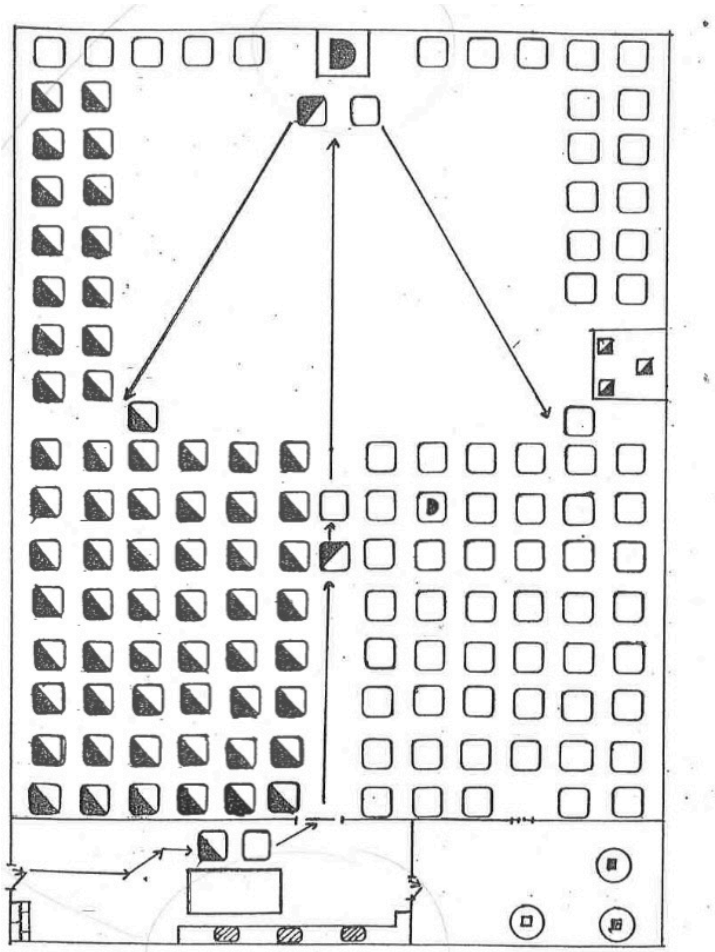
Figure 7. Keys of Belgin Aygün's movement diagrams (1982). See glossary for translation and explanation of the terms.



In this diagram, the arrows clearly indicate the spatial trajectory that the devotee follows when accessing the space. The presence in the entrance room of both a symbol for man and one for woman indicates that members of both genders enter through the same door. The caption suggests that men and women alike perform a prayer to the threshold (*eşik niyazı*) in this lobby, however it does not offer hints to detect how this prayer is kinetically realized. Discussing the services enacted during the rituals, Aygün specifies that the *kapıcı* waits at the door to supervise and greet the ones who enter. To them he proffers the exclamations *Hü Eyvallah* (roughly translatable as 'God, yes by God') bringing his right hand to the lips (Aygün 1982:31). After departing from the entrance room, both the man and the woman traverse the centre of the *meydan* and head straight ahead towards the

dede seating in the other side of the room. As the caption suggests, after getting closer to him, they offer him a prayer (*dedeye niyaz*), and finally, depending on their gender, they proceed to take a seat on the right or left side of the room.

Figure 8. Entrance to the *cemevi*, prayer to the threshold, prayer to the *dede* and plan of seating organisation in Belgin Aygün's movement diagrams (1982).



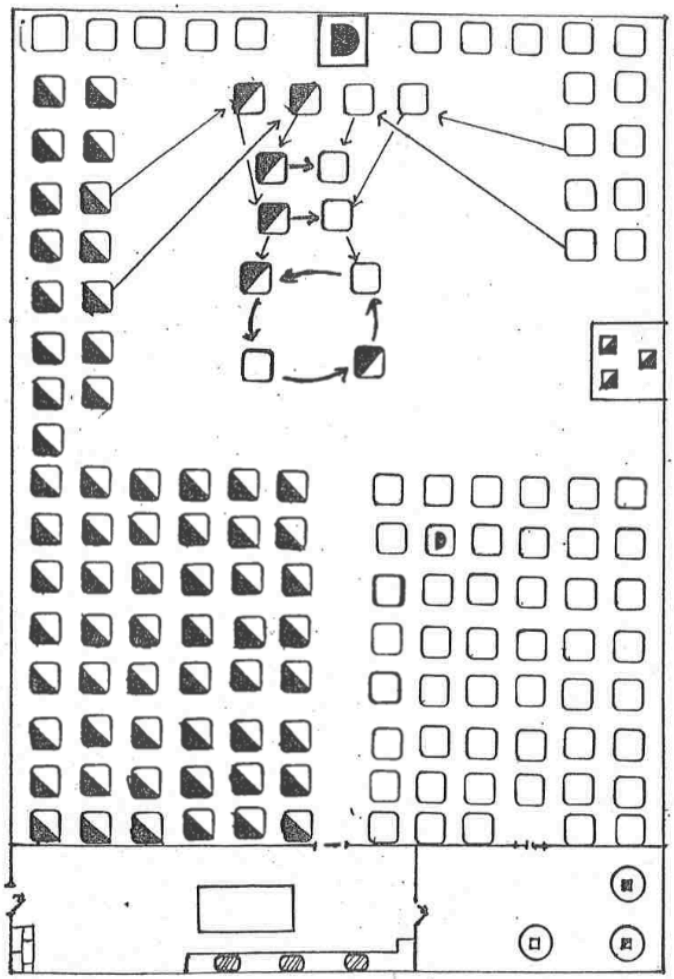
The diagram does not offer clues to detect which movements are performed during these spatial trajectories, nor as part of the prayer to the threshold and to the *dede*. In this sense, the diagram is blind in providing information about what happens inside each movers' 'kinesphere' and on the timing of the movements. We may assume that the devotees are walking, but how? Are they always walking

forward? Or are they possibly stepping backwords after offering their prayer to the *dede*, and thus stay frontally orientated towards him, as it is the case common in the *ayn-i cem* rituals that I experienced years later during fieldwork research and as it was realized in *Kardeşlik Töreni - Samah*, the theatre piece that was inspired by Aygün's thesis? Furthermore, are they possibly lowering down their bodies somewhere in the space? What kind of contacts are articulated among one's own body parts, among different bodies and with the space? Do they touch the ground? Do they look at each other? How are they sitting? In short, how are these prayers articulated through physical actions? What is certainly possible to remark in that the notations testify a gendered organisation of the space, with a clear demarcation of areas allocated to men and to women.

The second (fig. 9) and third diagram (fig. 10) illustrate movements performed as part of two distinct *semah*s. The first of these involves four *semahcı*s, composed of two couples of a man and a woman. Standing up from their sitting area on the right and left sides of the *meydan*, these devotees proceed to offer a salutation to the *dede* before moving slightly backwords towards the centre of the *meydan* and aligning on two lines, again with the women on the left and men on the right. They then approach the centre of the *meydan* as they organise in a circle interlaying a man and a woman and progressing in anti-clockwise direction. As it was the case in the first diagram, also here, we are not offered enough clues to detect how these space trajectories are articulated inside each movers' 'kinesphere' and what may be their timing. Especially, we wonder about the directions of their steps, either when they are getting closer to and departing from the *dede*, as well as when they organise in a circle. Do they progress on a line, sideways or backwords? Do they pay attention to always stand frontally towards

the *dede*? Do they perform any additional action when transiting from these different fixed forms, and how are these actions articulated? Even though the diagrams do not respond to these questions, as we should see in Chapter 6, *Kardeşlik Töreni-Samah*, the theatre piece which was developed after Aygün's dissertation, provides elements to suggest what kinetic elements were not documented in writing, but conveyed through the staged performance.[99]

Figure 9. A *semah* for four, pattern of the salutation and of the dance.



2- Dört kişilik bir semah, niyaz ve oyun düzeni.

[99] For instance, we may infer that the spatial trajectories in fig. 3 were incorporated on the stage as part of the *semah* following on the second dramatic sequence illustrating the establishment of a brotherhood kin (*müsahiplik*) between two male members of the Alevi community and their female partners on the stage.

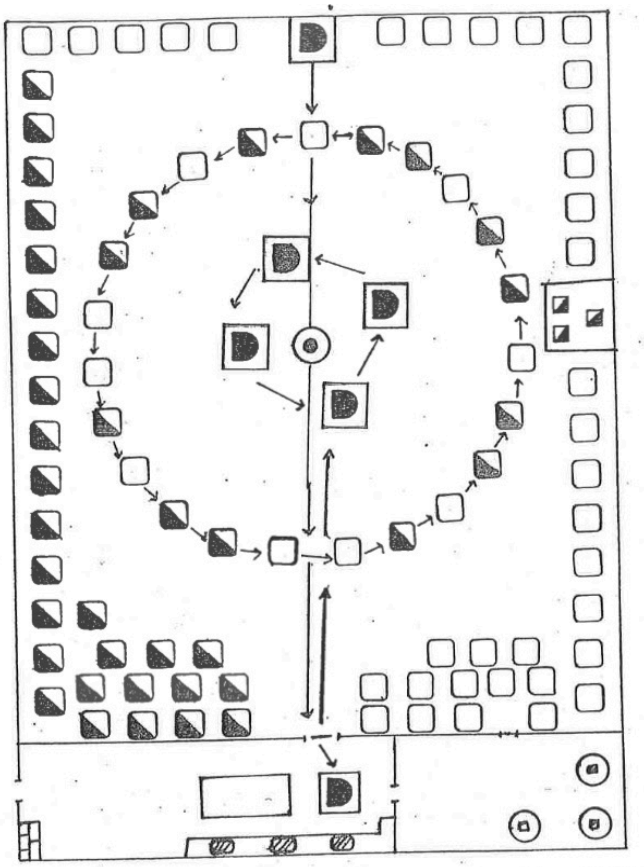
Another *semah* is illustrated in the third diagram (fig. 10). This represents movements of a much more crowded *Kırklar Semahı* (lit. 'Semah of the Forties'). Here 24 devotees organise as a circle progressing on a line in anti-clockwise direction; in this case men and women do not interlay regularly, but in a more complex pattern[100]. During this *semah*, the *çerağcı* (in charge of keeping lit the candle) stands in the centre of the *meydan*; the *dede* gets also involved in the movement: after leaving the ritual space, he gets back and forms alone an inner circle progressing counter-clockwise around the *cerağcı*.[101]

The final diagram (fig. 11) illustrates how devotees sit during the *sofra*, the ritual communal meal (see 3.2). We see here how they divide in groups shaped around six boards arranged by the *sofracılar*, the ones in charge of preparing the food. These come from the area that is supposed to function as a kitchen at the left back side space of the ritual space, and are accompanied by the *sâkiler*, the ones in charge of distributing the beverages. This spatial organisation is also gendered, with men occupying mostly the right side of the space as well as the circle surrounding the *dede* and the women sitting mostly on the left. Both men and women compose together a central circle, whereas the *pervane*s and the *aşık*s remain in their habitual location on the right side of the space and next to the entrance.

Figure 10. *Semah* of the Forties: after the *dede* exits, he gets back and participates in the last part of the dance (following page).

[100] This is composed as below: a woman, followed by a man, followed by two women, two men, a woman, a man, two women, two men, a woman, a man, two women, a man, two women, a man, two women, a man (w-m-w-w-m-m-w-m-w-w-m-m-w-m-w-w-m-w-w-m-w-w-m). (Possibly, w-m-2w-2m / w-m-2w-2m / w-m / 2w-m / 2w-m / 2w-m).

[101] The involvement of the *cerağcı* and of the *dede* at the centre of a the *meydan* was not incorporated in any *semah*s performed in KTS and did not occur in the *ayn-i cem* rituals that I witnessed during fieldwork.

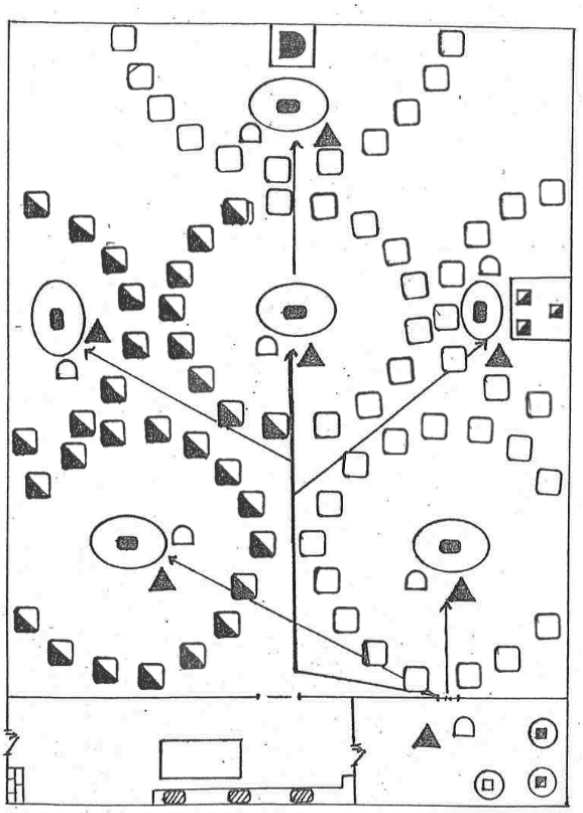


3- Kırklar semahı, dedenin çıkışı sonra yeniden içeri girerek semahın son bölümünde oyuna katılması.
Geniş bilgi için bak. s.78

In an interview recorded in Istanbul in December 2017, Aygün informed me that through the diagrams she wished to convey the complexity of the movements in a simple visual way (2017). As such, these diagrams can be understood as a local notation system born out of the need to visually document body movements in the context of studies in Drama at Ankara University.[102]

Figure 11. Sitting organization for the *sofra*: the *saki*, *sofraci*, *ayakçı* and *aşçı* offer the service in this order (following page).

[102] Bozkurt (1988) reproduces one of the diagrams and a German translation of the accompanying legend, even though without indication of the source. I wish to thank Janina Karowleski for providing this information and forwarding me a copy of this publication.



4- Sofraya oturuş düzeni, sâki, sofracı, ayakçı ve aşçı bu sırada hizmet verir.

4.3 *Kırklar Semahı* from Erzincan in Benesh notation

The second scholar who had already approached the kinetic morphologies of the *semah*s through a notation tool is Nasuh Barın. Born in a Bektaşi background, Barın had studied ballet at the Ankara State Conservatory and then at the Folkwang Dance School in Essen, Germany, where he trained with choreographer Jean Cebron among others. After moving back to Turkey, since 1978 he started working as dancer and choreographer for the Ankara and Istanbul State Opera and Bale Company, as well as dance teacher at the State Conservatories of Anadolu and Mimar Sinan University. More than that, Barın is a novelist, a scholar and a translator. As a novelist, in 1986 Barın published an autobiographical novel with the title *Kırpıntılar* (lit. 'Clippings'); as a scholar, in 1999 he compiled a detailed study on Western dance history (*Batı Dans Tarıhı*) (1999).

His translations include an introduction to Michel Foucault' *History of Madness*, realized together with Enis Batur in 1982, and a study on Bektaşi history by Sureiya Farouqui (2003), originally published in German.

Between 1993 and 1994 Barın released a dossier on the *semah*s which was published in six parts on the newly founded Alevi monthly *Nefes* (1993a, 1993b, 1994a, 1994b, 1994c, 1994d). The dossier was the result of two years of research and through reference to studies in archelogy, religion, theatre and folklore, it expounded the *semah*s as primordial practices of a shamanistic origin. The dossier included a list and brief presentation of more than forty *semah* types[103] and raised the need for a large folkloric collection (*derleme*) to be conducted on the topic. Barın proposed that a team composed of a choreographer, a musicologist, a movement notator, a music notator, a sociologist, an ethnographer, and a cameraman would get together and visit the *ayn-i cem* rituals found throughout Anatolia, the Balkans and the Turkic Republics. This team would produce a multimedia archive on the *semah*s, a task which Barın advocated as a first necessary step to approach such a 'deep' (*derin*) topic. A closing contentious note affirmed that, despite the principles of tolerance in Alevi-Bektashism, some conservative circles would such certainly considered such a research proposal as a 'perverse thought' (*sapık düşünçeler*) (Barın 1994d: no page). Nevertheless, the

[103] These are: *Arguvan Semahı, Ali Nur Semahı, Aliyar Semahı, Altıya Girmek Semahı, Bengi Semahı, Bozok Semahı, Cebrail Semahı, Çamşığı Semahı, Çarpaz Semahı, Çark Semahı, Çoban Baba Semahı, Çorlu Semahı, Erkân Semahı, Dem Geldi Semahı, Erzincan Semahı, Fethiye Semahı, Garipler Semahı, Gençler Semahı, Gönüller Semahı, Hacı Bektaş Semahı, Hubuyar Semahı, İçeri Semahı, Kartal Semahı, Kırat Semahı, Kırklar Semahı, Ladik Semahı, Miraçlama Semahı, Muhammet Ali Semahı, Nevruz Semahı, Sarı Turnam Semahı, Sarsıl Semahı, Şiran Semahı, Tevhit Semahı, Tarsus Semahı, Turhal Semahı, Turnalar Semahı, Üryanlar Semahı, Yatır Semahı, Ya Hızır Semahı.*

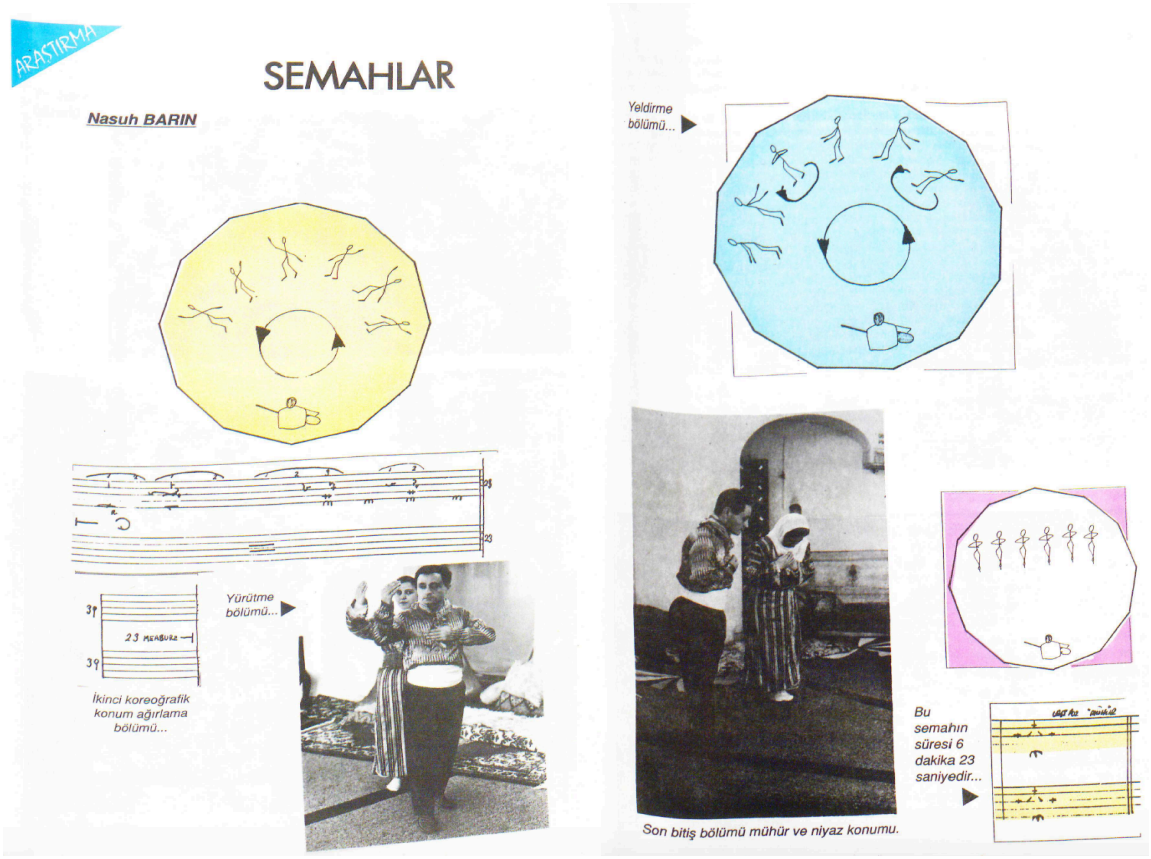
researcher should not abandon the task, as 'written history records also the existence of such people on its pages' (ibid.).

To provide a model of how such a research would look like, Barın included in the dossier musical notations, movement notations and some images related to the *Kırklar Semahı* from Erzincan, one of the most popular *semah*s at the time and still today (1994c, 1994d). The musical notations were produced by Adnan Ataman after Aşık Daimi's performances and retrieved from the TRT archive at Istanbul University Conservatoire. The movement notations were produced by a ballet dancer and Benesh notator at the State Opera after Barın's request (fig. 12). However, because of the fear of being associated with the publication and subsequently risking losing her job, the notator, who did not herself have an Alevi background, asked her name not to be credited on the dossier (Barın 2018). Even though Barın had acquired some basic skills in the Kinetography Laban while studying in Germany, his request that the notations would be produced with the Benesh system is not accidental since, as we have seen already in the introduction to this chapter, this system was, and is still, much more current in the Turkish dance sector.

Rather than the one of prescribing how the movements should be performed in the ritual contexts as well as in public performances of the *semah*s, the objective motivating the production of these notations was a purely descriptive and documentative one. However, as the dossier was already in preparation, its release unexpectedly followed a few months after the massacre at the Madımak Otel in Sivas. Whether approaching the *semah*s through a multimedia set of archiving tools was initially intended as a way to bring scholarly and public attention to the topic, the events of Sivas may have contributed to a different perception of

what the project entailed. In fact, 'scripturalizing' the formal aspects of the ritual, more than only their liturgical significance, may have been felt now as a more urgent strategy for preserving the very Alevi memory and existence.

Figure 12. Photographs and Benesh notations inserted in Barın's dossier (1994d).



My use of the term 'scripturalizing' is here deliberate and reminiscent of Tord Olsson's reflection (1998) on the process of fixing Alevi esoteric knowledge in texts such as cathecisms and written instructions.[104] This process of scripturalization, accelerated in the late 1980s, is often characterized by a scientific character, which Olsson labels 'emic historiography of religion' within world-wide claims of religious

[104] Using Derrida's idea of 'irreducible alterabilities' of texts, Olsson dates back this process to the the 16th century when early Turkish Buyruk manuscripts retained the character of esoteric trasmission from master to disciple in dialogic forms of writing (1998:242).

minorities to write their own history. Accordingly, I suggest that fixing of bodily ritual knowledge in notation may be read in its own right as an important form of contemporary religious urban Alevi practice, even as an epigraphic or 'talismanic' phenomenon. The Benesh scores inserted in the dossier did not however have the impact that he had hoped, if not for their insertion as appendix in later editions of a publication on the *semah*s by İlhan Cem Erseven (1990). Even though Barın had wished that a research on the *semah*s, supported also by movement notations, would boost interest on the topic among Turkish circles engaged in dance and folklore, his expectations had to be short lived. In fact, due to a lack of institutional and financial support, the research project that he envisioned was never realized.[105]

4.4 Learning movements and how to write them

My corporeal knowledge of the *semah*s was gained through participation in *semah* classes throughout a vast array of ritual, civic and artistic contexts. My first live encounter with a *semah* occurred in February 2009 when I first visited the Ankara Deneme Sahnesi rehearsal studio in the Batıkent district of Ankara. A mixture of naïf orientalism, audacious explorative thirst and clumsy aesthetic sensibility drove my curiosity to approach this almost invisible theatre space at the outskirts of an uncontrolled urban landscape. Here the *semah*s were being taught and adapted for the piece *Kardeşlik Töreni – Samah* that will be discussed in Chapter 5. For five months, while I bartered my Italian to improve my Turkish skills,

[105] In a recorded interview, Barın (2018) lamented how, back in the early '90s, the State organisms which he approached for sponsoring such a research despised him by informing him that a similar project on *semah*s documentation had already been financed and was underway.

the sensual experience of learning Alevi music and movements in a theatre context marked my enchantment and yearning to know more. Over the next couple of years, I then tried and channelled my enthusiasm into a more systematic inquisitive search. In September 2010, as I moved back to Ankara for a one year Erasmus program exchange in the Social Anthropology department at the Middle East Technical University (METU), I joined again the rehearsals and witnessed the performances of the piece as part of a more structured fieldwork research. During this academic year, I also joined few *semah* classes with the Folklore Society of METU (*Türk Halk Bilimi Topluluğu*), I visited few *cemevi*s and Alevi organizations in Ankara and met and recorded interview with relevant key informants. More than attending several ritual events, I occasionally also participated in *semah* classes, such as in the *cemevi* attached to the *Haci Bektaş Veli Anadolu Kültür Vakfı* in Dikmen, or at the *Pir Sultan Abdal Derneği* in Kızılay.

Years later, my learning of the *semah*s continued abroad. After enrolling in the current PhD program, between September 2015 and June 2016, I regularly participated in the *semah* classes in the main *cemevi* in Dalston, London with the teachers Seher Ağbaba, and less frequently, Saffet Yürükel. In Dalston, with the music teacher Barış Baran, I also joined beginners' group *bağlama* classes, an instrument that I had already started learning to play in Ankara and then with the musician and dancer Mahmut Demir in Paris. Participating in the courses in London led me to join two public events organized by the British Alevi Federation (BAF) in Spring 2016. In April, I joined both as *semahcı* and *bağlama* player the festival 'Alevism and Semah' hosted at the University of Cambridge, an event that was highly visible on Alevi online and social media. In this occasion, with a crowded group of *semahcı*s I performed one of the most common *semah*s, the *Kırklar*

Semahı (Semah of the Forty) from Erzincan.[106] The group was composed mostly by women and children, who were organized in three concentric circles, the youngsters occupying the most external and the elders the inner one. In June, I then joined as *semahcı*, the 6th Alevi festival in Hackney Downs Park, London turning the *semah Ya Rabbi Aşkın Ver Bana* (lit. 'Oh Lord, Give me your Love').[107] Also in this occasion the group of *semahcı* was composed mostly of children and women. As in Cambridge, despite the protests of many of the youngsters who did not want to wet their feet on the mouldy grass, in the park we turned the *semah*s without wearing shoes. Finally, during Autumn 2016, I joined a *semah* class at the *cemevi* in Bondy at the outskirts of Paris with the teacher Sibel Güneş, and then again in Turkey, with the *Şahkulu Sultan Dergahı Semah Ekibi* in Göztepe, Istanbul.

Kinaesthetic and psychophysical engagement during fieldwork provided a privileged lens to understand how enacting specific postures and group arrangements configures not only a sensorial environment, but also a system of values. It made clear how Alevi ritual contexts are exemplary of the way harmonizing movement – among body parts, among different bodies, and among different spatial and sonic stimuli – does not only enhance shared aesthetic experiences but also testifies to human's fundamental potential for communication and cooperation. In this sense, I uphold Andrée Grau's though-provoking views of her mentor John Blacking on the place of dance in human evolution, thus arguing

[106] A video fragment can be found on the facebook page of the London based Alevi radio channel Dem Radyo (2016). My participation as an Italian during the event inspired curiosity and a reporter from the Alevi TV channel TV10 recorded an interview with me which was inserted in a brief news about the event.

[107] A video fragment of the *semah* can be found on the facebook page of the *İngiltere Alevi Kültür Merkezi ve Cemevi* (2016).

that ‘the ability to move together in time allowed collaboration among individuals’ (2015:233). The skill to coordinate one’s body parts to other bodies in time would ‘lead to the acquisition of language, and, therefore, culture’ (ibid.). For Grau, language and bipedalism were later stage developments in human evolution, stemming from humans’ capacity to articulate such elementary artistic processes as singing, body percussing and dancing. Body movement is indeed not a mere incidence. The way we walk and sit are not just ‘natural’ modalities to cope with the environment, but are revelatory of geographical and socio-historical conjunctures, and intrinsically imbued of socio-political forces. As such, the expert expression of movement not only responds to an aesthetic demand, but also to an ethical one, if the two may ever be split.

During ethnographic fieldwork, as I started learning the *semah*s and appreciate how these were adapted on the stage, I soon experienced the challenges encountered by any researcher who wishes to document the movements of the body. Photos and videos could help only until a certain extent in this task. Photos would only capture solidified moments of stillness out of the movements’ flow, and more generally, the cameras would always be limited by their offering of a visual and ‘external’ perception on the movements, rather than documenting them from the much more complex perspective of the moving person. Moreover, even when simultaneous captures would be edited one next to another, cameras would only offer one perspective at the time. Furthermore, it felt to me problematic that videos by necessity impose attention on some movements to the detriment of others, privileging the point of view of the videographer, of the choreographer or of the performers, without the possibility of indicating the distance between choreographer’s intent and performer’s interpretation.

As I felt the need for a tool which would assist me throughout the research, in an inspiring text by Anya P. Royce (1977), I discovered the existence of movement notation systems and their use in anthropological research. Generally, the benefits and shortages of movement notation are evaluated in opposition to the use of cameras or video recordings, as did Herbinson-Evans already in the mid-1980s (1985:46). Many of these benefits and shortcomings did not change much over more than three decades. Even if notation systems do not substitute video records, they can complete the audio-visual documentation for more than one reason.[108] Their limits are however weighty as well. For instance, like the difficulties that a music notator would encounter if he had to notate down a musical score in real time, it is challenging to notate instantly the movements that are being performed, even more when several performers are involved. The biggest obstacle is however their limited use; probably because movement notation is still not taught at school in any country, the number of those who use them is still very narrow, and notating or decoding a movement score is still a very specialized job. In fact, just a few experts are literate in movement notation, and one may regret that dance has not yet become a truly literate art.

Once I assessed that using movement notation would have assisted me during fieldwork research, I had to decide on which movement notation system I wanted to learn. Since the 17th century, different movement notation systems have been created even though, differently than in music, none of them became

[108] Movement notation systems are in fact rather stable tools, as they are not subject to obsolescence as much as video technology; they are efficacious, as they can render effectively the details of all kind of movements; they are malleable, as they can be adjusted to the needs of the documentation, for instance giving the choreographer freedom to leave parts of the composition open to the interpretation of the dancer. More than that, notation constitutes an economical tool through which information can be systematically stored and randomly accessed later.

'universal', not even inside 'western' dance traditions. My choice fell on today's most used movement notation system in anthropology, first devised by Rudolf Van Laban (1879-1958), a Hungarian visual artist and theorist who, together with his students and followers, conceived a method for the practice and analysis of any kind of movement of the human body.[109] The system initially devised by Laban is currently known through two ramifications: the Kinetography Laban, its European articulation, and Labanotation, used more in the UK and US. Because I studied the system in France, I trained in Kinetography and this is the term I use in this discussion. As speakers of two dialects of the same language, Kinetographers and Labanotators can read and decode each other's' scores, even though they may puzzle in front of slight differences in use. In the system body movements are written from the point of view of the moving person, considering the kinetic intent as well as the actual interpretation. Signs indicating direction and relations (of, and between body parts and other objects) and sign indicating the luck of changes are organized over a chart. The horizontal plan of this chart indicates the different body parts involved in the movement; and these are organized on columns systematized symmetrically as for the left and right halves of the body. The vertical plan of the chart indicates instead the passing and measuring of time, so that simultaneous movements are written on the same horizontal line.[110] Many of Laban's followers in Europe and in the States revised and developed this system further. Some, such as Ingmar Bartenieff (Bartenieff and Lewis 1980), Warren Lamb, Peggy Hackney

[109] For an exhaustive investigation of Laban's theories, researches and activities and see Maletić (1987); especially, 'Appendix I: The Lived Body-Space-Expression' offers a sound discussion of the philosophical paradigms underlying Laban's concepts and his grounding of any knowledge in experience. Moore (2009) offers a very comprehensive discussion of Laban's concepts and methods which details how Laban tried to integrate various research domains in order to propose a theory of movement harmony.

[110] Challet-Haas (1999) is an excellent grammar in French to learn the basics of the Kinetography Laban. Hutchinson (1954) is a valuable source for learning Labanotation.

(1998) and Carol Lynne Moore (2009), were more concerned with the qualitative aspects of movement, and elaborated a supplementary system called *Laban Movement Analysis*. Others, such as Valerie Preston-Dunlop and Ann Hutchinson Guest, developed *Laban Motif Description* (also called *Motif Writing*, or *Symbolisation* in France), which analyses the most significant aspects of movement sequences or their guiding intentions without specifying all the exact details of execution (Venable 1998).[111] Even if my training has been primarily in the Kinetography Laban, I gained some competence in the two other systems as well.[112]

Notation systems are a useful methodological asset for ethnographers of movement practices because they provide a visual grammar into which it is possible to record, compare and analyse any kind of movement on paper.[113] Even though some scholars may protest that they are cumbersome and need too much time to be learned, often when they engage in analysing body movement, they may

[111] Motif Description was born for educational purposes out of the more complex Kinetography Laban-Labanotation, with which it shares many theoretical assumptions and graphical symbols. Valerie Preston-Dunlop was the forerunner developing the system over the 1960s in England and Ann Hutchinson-Guest contributed to its codification in the Unites States over the 1970s and 1980s (Venable 1998). The grammar that I used to study this system is Chaalet-Haas (2010). As a lighter and simplified system, currently Motif Description is mostly used as a pedagogical tool for introductory approaches to movement literacy and as well as an aide-mémoire and prompt for dance improvisations.

[112] I studied Laban Movement Analysis over a one week workshop with Angela Louriero De Souza at the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique et Danse de Paris (CNSMDP), and then during a one day workshop led by Jean Johnson Jones that I organised at the Drama department in Exeter thanks to GW4 founding. My understandings of *Symbolisation* was gained through joining workshops led by Jacqueline Challet-Haas at the CNSMDP in Paris.

[113] Anthropologists and ethnochoreologists who successfully use Labanotation include Theresa Buckland, Brenda Farnell, Catherine Foley, Kate Grim-Feinberg, Sonja Hinz, Jean Johnson Jones, Adrienne Kaeppler, Maria Koutsouba, Mohd Anis Nor, Monica Santos, Judy Van Zile, Drid Williams, and Suzanne Youngerman. The Kinetography Laban was used by Elena Bertuzzi, Janos Fugedi, Roderyk Lange, Selena Rakočević, and Placida Staro. Naoko Abe used the Kinetography in the field of urban sociology and robotics. Anca Giurchescu and Eva Kröschlová, who used the Kinetography, published an overview on the use of notation as part of structural analysis in ethnochoreology (2007).

end up devising their own notation system. Such was the case of the anthropologist Alfred Gell (1999:140), who after lamenting that both Laban and Benesh notation (another very much used system) are incomprehensible 'systems of hieroglyphics' to non-experts, devised his own crude system to represent graphically the sole movements of the legs in the context of the Umeda dance of Papua New Guinea. Albeit, dance anthropologists such as Judy Van Zile (1985:45) affirm that 'notation is not more complicated than the movement it documents and the teaching of it is also the teaching of skills in visual perception'. Having trained in the Kinetography Laban, I agree that notation systems are not that complicated, yet the assistance of a teacher is required to approach them since their decoding may require a lot of energy and efforts[114]. The greatest benefit is however that they can facilitate comparisons and dialogue between researches, in a way that may not be possible with invented systems for individual use.

To document the Alevi *semah*s in suitable standards of movement description, since 2010 I started learning the Laban systems, first with the help of the choreographer Emilie Gallier, who offered a short private training on the basic principles of the Kinetography in Leiden, the Netherlands. Then, between 2013 and 2015, I enrolled in a diploma at the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique et Danse de Paris (CNSMDP) in France. Studying the Kinetography in Paris offered me the chance to immerse myself in movement observation and participation under the guidance of professor Noëlle Simonet, and joining seminars led by other experts who offered further perspectives on the analysis of

[114] The lack of handy software to edit kinetographs contributes to these difficulties. In this thesis, I used the LabanWriter, an open-source software for Mac developed by the Ohio State Department of Dance.

movement.[115] To obtain my diploma in movement notation from the CNSMDP, resorting to my previous participation in rehearsals of the piece *Kardeşlik Töreni – Samah* and through constant exchange with Selçuk Göldere, one of its choreographers, and some of the actors, I translated some kinetic fragments from this piece into detailed kinetographs. For instance, I notated the *Urfa Semahı* (Semah from Urfa) (see appendix) which was performed in the production and compared its different executions over two different editions of the piece, as well as the quite complex scene during which the actors enter on the stage.

4.5 Performing critical Kinetography

Most considerations of the *semah*s in academic literature approach the practices to discuss social issues that are beyond the movement forms. In contrast to those, my perspective wanted to relate and reflect about an experiential bodily learning of these movement forms. The practical learning of the *semah*s was my way of getting closer to a 'native' point of view, and thus 'make the strange become familiar' as for the worthiest agendas in anthropological research. Moreover, it was informed by the perception that body movement analysis cannot be confined to a visual experience; there was much more to be learned by kinaesthetic and emphatic participation in *semah* learning. In this section, I intend to explain what I

[115] Other teachers with whom I studied at the CNSMDP are: Jacqueline Challet Haas, eminent pedagogue who established that programme, Angela Louriero de Souza teaching Laban Movement Analysis, Sophie Rousseau teaching body musicality, Odile Roquet teaching Functional Analysis of the Dancing Body (*Analyse Fonctionnelle du Corps dans le Mouvement Dansé*). At the beginning of this program, I also joined an initiation module to Benesh notation led by professor Eliane Mirkabekiantz. Despite the validity and swiftness of the Benesh system and its successful use by a number of anthropologists, after the advice of Andrée Grau, herself trained in Benesh notation, I choose to study Laban, whose larger use among dance ethnographers and ethnochoreogists opens the way now for comparative analyses that would not be possible without a 'common language' shared by many researchers around the world.

mean with 'critical kinography' by reflecting on my critical use of the Kinetography Laban in gathering, producing and delivering knowledge about the *semah*s. The recourse to movement notation was conceived as a way of speaking not only *about* movement but also *through* it. However, the ethnographic requirement of self-reflectivity urged me to reflect on the situatedness of Laban theories and methods, and to question how these influenced my organization of thoughts, encounters with informants and data, and the delivery of research findings. Acknowledging how methodologies and theories shaped my thinking is a necessary step to question not only *what* a worthy topic of scholarly attention is, but also *how* we attend to and construct such attentiveness to scholarly topics. Accordingly, against any claim of universality and objectivity in the understanding of the *semah*s offered here, I wished to cultivate a more phenomenological approach. This meant that I tried to stimulate an inter-subjective field of communication, one into which my subjective experiences and understandings would not be silenced but would be able to converse with diverse subjectivities encountered during fieldwork and in more academic and professional environments.

Even though used today all over the world by scholars of diverse cultural backgrounds to address any kind of movement structure, as any other system of knowledge, the Kinetography is an apparatus that is culturally situated.[116] Notwithstanding its sought universality and transcultural application, its origins and history have been nurtured in a Euro-American theatre dance context. Similar to Joann Keali'inohomoku's call for anthropologists to look at ballet as a form of ethnic

[116] The International Council of Kinetography Laban (ICKL) is an international organisation which meets every two year to discuss developments in the rules and use of the Laban systems. Members come from diverse locations and are affiliated to artistic and scholarly institutions worldwide. ICKL conferences are organised in rotation in the Americas, in Europe and in Asia.

dance (1969), with the awareness of the limitations of using the term 'ethnic' as a referent for a solidified social construction of historical diversity, I sought to look at the Kinetography Laban as an *ethnic* knowledge system pertaining to movement. Started as a merely speculative provocation, such a look on methodology offered food for thought to reflect over the strong Western origins of the system and some of its underlying assumptions. Considering these givens within the system meant becoming able to assess how together with information about the movements analysed through it, the use of the Kinetography conveys by necessity also the cultural values within which it was developed. If unquestioned, such values remain always operative in the shaping of understanding of indigenous movement system which elude Western epistemologies, such as the *semah*. My critical use of the system did not mean that I aimed at undermining the aspiration of the Laban systems to work as a universal system for movement notation. Rather at the opposite, I assumed that considering the limits of the system could contribute to a critique that is possibly as useful as the advocacy with which many practitioners and scholars who use the system promote its learning and dissemination (i.e. Farnell 2012:34-68).

Even when applied to document folk movement practices (the Hungarian ethnochoreological tradition being most certainty very strong in this area), the use of movement notation systems is most commonly limited to forms which are normally conceptualized as 'dances'. My investigation pertained to a ritual movement system whose categorization as dance is controversial, a reason why I looked for previous examples of alternative application of the Laban system out of canonical dance archiving and ethnochoreology. This critical use of the Kinetography allowed me to reflect on what were the culturally specific values and

assumptions about movement pertaining to Laban notation systems that would not make sense in a different movement context, in other words I weighed to which extent the system itself carried ethnocentric pitfalls.

When applied to document practices which share little with Euro-American theatre dance forms, the system reveals more clearly some of the underlying cultural values within which it developed and some of its subtle ethnocentric pitfalls. Donata Carbone (1989) advanced interesting points of reflection in this direction. For instance, she noticed how some symbols containing letters of the alphabet (such as the symbol for head (C), for water (A), earth (T) etc.) suggest a word rather than providing abstract representation, thus contradicting one of the basic semiotic principles governing the system. Moreover, it is an index of ethnocentrism the fact that rather than from any other language, these words are derived from Latin (*caput*, *aqua*, *terra*), a language which was used at the time of their adoption to make their use sound more universal. Another ethnocentric shortage noticed by Carbone depends on the use of an open rectangle for floor pattern drawings into which the open side represents the stage opening. These replicates a strict division between performance and audience and forces frontal presentation and viewing, even though these elements do not exist in most peasant cultures and in many non-European theatrical forms. In Carbone's words:

> No such division exists in most peasant cultures, nor in non-European theatrical forms. In European theatre too, other stage forms and new relationships between the performers and the public are being experimented, implying the existence of a number of possibilities. Therefore, while the open stage area sign is suitable for notating movement sequences in a European theatre situation, its usage in instances which do not contain a frontal viewing, forces the movement analysis into arbitrary schemes. (1989:5)

This observation by Carbone applies to the problems of using the Kinetography to analyse the *semah*s. Even though within the ritual performance contexts the area

occupied by the *dede* certainly acquires a stronger focal focus as 'stage', still there would not be a strict frontal distinction between performers and observers. Such a lack is also commonly noticed in more secular context of *semah*s public presentation. Nonetheless, as part of my analysis through floorplans, it is important to acknowledge how I did recur to the convention of indicating a 'front stage' through indicating an open stage area, even when this did not actually exist.

The field of the anthropology of human movement, as developed by scholars such as Drid Williams and Brenda Farnell, provided an important critical framework which inspired alternative uses of Laban systems and models for its possible adaptation for ethnographic use. For instance, Farnell (1995) has adapted Labanotation to investigate Plains Indian Sign Language (PST), a native American gestural language that was used across the entire Plain region from Canada to Texas prior to the gradual imposition of English during the twentieth century. Because in this sign language speech and action were integrated in meaning making, Farnell worked simultaneously on their transcription. Also, because frames of references in PST were based on the four cardinal directions - north, south, east and west – of which the actor's perspective was always kinetically aware, Farnell adapted the movement scores to include indigenous referents for geographical orientation. Accordingly, taking indigenous concepts of 'language' and indigenous classifications into account, Farnell suggested critical and reflexive approaches in using movement notation while conducting ethnographic fieldwork.

An underlying cultural value which is subtly embedded in the Kinetography Laban, but that contrasts with *semah* conventions, is the primacy of what I would call 'body individualization' rather than 'body collectivization'. With 'body collectivization' in the *semah*s I wish to refer to the way the structures of the

*semah*s are strongly articulated through proficient use of group formations (normally circular paths) whereas solo forms and individual expressivity are usually rare and not encouraged. On the contrary, with 'movement individualization' I want to refer to the way the cultural mind-set within which the Kinetography was devised promoted the perception that devising and analysing movements of individual bodies is a preliminary step before being able to analyse how bodies interact with each other as part of groups. In fact, the Kinetography is more commonly taught by starting with the analysis of movements of a single body, whereas notating group movements and coordination in the space is a topic that is normally taught in later stages because of their alleged higher complexity. However, there is nothing intrinsically more complex in the analysis of space and group dynamics when compared to the intricacies of analysing how the transfer of weight between the two legs happens.[117]

On the contrary, a cultural assumption which the Kinetography and the *semah*s shared is the emphasis on verticality. In Kinetography, notating movements which are executed on one or two body supports (normally the feet) is always easier than notating movements which are executed on more (such as sitting, crawling or laying). However, when we consider the developmental stages in movement acquisition, movements that require more than two body supports are technically 'easier' to be learned. Nonetheless, the fact that notating movements which require only one or two body supports is easier is a convention as it depends on the fact that movements considered worth analysing and documenting were

[117] In some respect, pedagogies in Laban Motif Description obviate for such a pitfall.

normally executed while standing in the cultural context where the Kinetography was developed. In other words, because the vertical position of the body is assumed to be a more 'natural', this was made easier to be notated. Such a convention did not constitute a difficulty in the analysis of the *semah*s, since here the moving bodies rarely lower to the ground, with the transfer of weight shifting constantly between the two legs and the torso being kept constantly upright. Even though the circular paths command attention to the horizontal plane, they ultimately emphasize verticality. One of the most common body postures, called *dâr*, during which the left and right body halves seem to be folded towards the vertical axis, certainly also emphasizes the attention to the vertical plane.

Finally, I should discuss how more than the mere purposes of movement documentation, using a notation system offered a performative scheme that signposted my role as a movement researcher among informants, as well as among peer scholars. Rather than limiting my tasks to the recording of photos or videos, performing the role of the kinetographer led me to realize how movement notation shields the dance scholar with a stronger aura of legitimacy and seriousness.[118] Within academic institutions and founding bodies, the fact that I had a movement notation system available was perceived to be indicative of authority and credibility as a committed researcher, and it certainly raised curiosity and support for my research pursuits. The same was true within fieldwork sites, where the fact that I could use the Kinetography became the starting place of thousands of interesting conversations during which I often became the vessel through which many informants learned about the possibility and practice of

[118] Discussion with anthropologist Andrée Grau enabled me to clarify this point.

documenting movements on paper as it would be possible in music.[119] The use of the Kinetography was normally perceived with admiration, and similarly to my engagement in *bağlama* lessons, it suggested my genuine commitment and contribution to the study of the Alevi *semah*s, and more generally, to the Alevi cause.

In discussing the process of research and documentation of choreographies of the Kokuma Dance Theatre, Jean Johnson Jones (1999) discussed how teaching the principles of Labanalysis (an integration of Labanotation and Laban Movement Analysis) to the artistic director of the company enabled him to take decision on how his choreographic work was to be analysed. During her fieldwork, Johnson Jones thus performed also the role of the movement analysis teacher more than a movement researcher. In this way, she could facilitate the circulation of expertise through which the choreographer became able to approach some of his own choreographies through a more analytic perspective. Differently than Johnson Jones' ingenious ethnography strategy, during fieldwork I did not manage to systematically teach the Kinetography Laban to my informants, and local understanding of what I was doing varied greatly. Sharing insights and my practice of movement notation was certainly easier among performing artists and dancers, whereas it felt uncomfortable when participating in rituals and other activities in the more devotional contexts. My knowledge and use of notation had however a long-lasting impact among my collaborators and informants. For instance, after assisting me in notating some of the movement sequences of one of the pieces that I

[119] The same could be said about my role as the scholar working on Alevi practices among fellow movement notators and performance scholars, who did commonly not have any previous knowledge of the *semah*s and of Alevi traditions and learned about the *semah*s through my research.

investigated and for which he worked as choreographer, Selçuk Göldere, decided to pursue the study of the Kinetography in the same course at the CNSMDP through which I obtained my diploma.

On a more psychological level, the use of the Kinetography enabled me to cope with the emotional charge experienced in the conduction of ethnographic fieldwork. In addition to the stress and vulnerability that any ethnographer experiences during fieldwork regardless of the topic researched, the practice of the *semah*s exposed me to considerable mental strain. *Semah* enactments evoke emotional engagement is not only because of the ritual significance that turning has for the Alevi devotee, but it is also entangled with the minority status of the Alevis, in Turkey and in the diaspora. As we have seen in Chapter 2, the *semah* is in fact associated to the burning memory of several episodes of violence that contribute in charging the practice as a symbol of political resistance. The episode of Sivas (2nd of July 1993), during which, under the careless eyes of security forces, an angry Sunni-nationalist mob set fire to the Madimak Otel, killing many musicians, poets and *semahcı*s, as well as a young Dutch student of anthropology (Carina Thujs), is especially marked in the Alevis' memory. In this very charged emotional realm, the Kinetography offered a tool that enabled me to take distance while fully engaging with bodymind postures and gestures. Setting up my role as the movement researcher who would break up the movements on an analytical level, the Kinetography offered a tool to 'anaesthetise' my own emotional engagement, remaining present and conscious while participating in the learning and moving through the experience.

Later, as part of research delivery in an academic context, I tried to restore the role of the senses into the analysis achieved with the kinetographs. This was

the case when I presented a poster during the ICTM Ethnochoreology symposium at the University of Graz in 2016, whose special theme was the place of the senses in dance and ethnochoreology. In this occasion, I decided to opt for a more manual engagement in the presentation, which resulted in the manufacturing of a handmade drawing through which I tried to partially shape knowledge in a non-linear way and engage more with the sense of touch in relation to the researching process. Even though due to time and transportation limits, I could not incorporate in the poster as many elements as I had originally planned (the strings of a *bağlama* or a piece of cloth of the dress of a *semahcı*), I managed to physically attach a *tezene*, the plectrum that is used to play the *bağlama*.[120]

4.6 Different uses of Laban-related notation tools in the thesis

As we have seen in 4.4, the method to analyse body movement developed by Laban and by his followers is broad and has subdivided into several branches. Even if my training has been primarily in the Kinetography Laban, I am able to decode Labanotation and I am familiar with Laban Movement Analysis and Laban Motif Description. I first used the Kinetography to analyse some fragments from the piece *Kardeşlik Töreni – Samah* (KTS). Resorting to my previous participation in rehearsals and looking at three different video records of the piece (one dating 1998, one 2003 and one 2008), I analysed the *Urfa Semahı* (Semah from Urfa) performed in the piece (Appendix A) and the quite complex scene during which the actors enter on the stage (Appendix B). As shall be discussed in Chapter 5, the latter defines how the piece was designed to negotiate the secretive character of

[120] An image of the poster, and a reflection of its preparation can be found in the symposium's conference proocedings (De Rosa 2017).

the rituals with the public nature of the theatre. Analysing KTS through the Kinetography Laban enabled me to better appreciate which kinetic innovations were made to adapt the *semah*s in a theatre context, such as the opening of the circle towards the audience, or the addition of extra bows and salutations addressed to the audience than to the actor interpreting the *dede* only.

In more ethnochoreological terms then, like the way Catherine Foley analysed Irish traditional step dancing (2012), I planned to create an inventory of characteristic *semah* movements to develop a structural analytical approach which would uncover the *semah*s' deep kinetic structures. I managed to work through this task only partially and the overview provided in the thesis remains very limited. My structural analytical approach became in fact quite different than Foley's, in as much as the movement traditions that I set to analyse is rather different from hers. Whereas traditional Irish step dance is generally performed solo before a group or an audience, a characteristic element that grounds the *semah*s and guarantees their recognition as such by movers and observers is the spatial organization of the group in circles. Because Irish step dance is a technical art into which there is a limited use of arm gestures, Foley's structural analysis is predominantly attentive to foot movements as this is the part of the body which has most significance. Differently than that, the spiritual connotation of the *semah*s and their embedment as a crucial segment in the complex *ayn-i cem* rituals results in the lack of a proper 'audience' during their enactment in traditional settings. Individual movements of the single *semahcı* are here only relevant because they are performed as part of group dynamics. The specificity of the circular paths and orientation of each individual in the space seemed to be of paramount significance in the kinetic as well as in the devotional system. Accordingly, I focused mostly on space dynamics

and circular paths, as well as on the frequent practice of bowing towards the *dede* and *zakir*s over the progression on the circle.

Such trajectories could be easily seized with preliminary signs and floor plans through graphic components of the Laban systems that are easily decoded even by those who are not learned kinetographers. These reasons made me decide to work more on these elements rather than on others (for instance, such as the relationship of the movement to the music). This choice meant that I focused more on movements performed *through space*, rather than movements performed *in place*. My use of the floor plans and the preliminary signs was however not standard in Kinetography, but closer to Laban Movement Description. In Kinetography, the signs indicating a circular path would be placed on the most external right side of the staff to indicate that all displacements and gestures described in the score need to be altered to respect the instruction of designing this specific circular path on the floor. However, as it is normally done in Laban Motif Description, I presented these trajectory signs on their own without detailing the actual footwork. This was also due to the fact that my analysis has been limited to an overview of the most common choreo-morphological denominators found throughout the very diversified set of body movements in the *semah*s by focusing on space dynamics.

The Kinetography enabled me to narrow my attention on recurring patterns of bodily configurations throughout the *semah*, starting with typical postures, often called *dâr*. The term *dâr* is a debated one: deriving from Persian, *dâr* means 'wood' but as a synecdoche also 'gallows'. The term names the centre of the ritual space as well as four bodily postures that are embodied during the rituals in remembrance of specific saintly figures who were publicly executed in historical times (for

instance, *dâr-ı Mansur*,).[121] Without the circumflex however, the Turkish word *dar* indicates something narrow or restricted. The *dâr* are not necessarily 'danced', in the sense that they may be performed during the movement progressions, but they can also be enacted as body postures during prayers which are articulated by speech and are not necessarily accompanied by music. One of the most common *dâr* is realized by concretizing an inward-oriented standing position which highlights the vertical line of the body axis, as if shrinking one's right and left halves towards it (kinetograph in fig. 13).[122] While the transfer of weight is kept stable on the two feet, these rotate towards the centre and the right sole is placed over the left toenails; at the same time the arms are slightly bent inwards, the hands are placed on the chest and the head is slightly bowed ahead. The characteristic placing of one foot over the other is a recurring unit which may be enacted also as part of some *semah*s, and or in other *dâr* standing which are not discussed here (i.e. performed by tilting the torso ahead perpendicularly to the legs or by kneeling).

The saint Kaygusuz Abdal has been often portrayed while standing in the *dâr* position with the right foot's toes over the left, and the right hand over the left one, both placed over the chest (fıg. 14). Cemil Demirsipahi described the *dâr* stand that I kinetographized as a typical posture that is enacted during the rituals. A similar placing of feet and hands is also performed during the *niyaz*, which Demirsipahi explained as the most fundamental bodily prayer within the rituals (1975). As he informs, this stand is enacted after the *dede* pronounces the form 'Allah Allah' to indicate that the *semah* is finished: the movers stop with the toes of

[121] This posture is named after the religious figure Hallaj-ı Mansur, normally remembered with for the words *Enel Hak* (Arabic 'I am the Truth') (see discussion in Zarcone 2016:790-797). In 6.5 I discuss how these words were used as part of the promotion for the concert event *Doğa Aşkına*.

[122] I wish to thank Angela Louriero de Souza for bringing my attention to this point.

the right foot over the left ones, the right hand over the left one, and their upper bodies slightly bowed. Comparing the human body in Alevi rituals to the importance of the *kıble* (the direction of Mecca towards which the Sunni devout should be faced when performing the prayer), Demirsipahi explained that the importance of this bowing movement, which may be addressed to the *dede* as well as to other devotees, depends on the high regard and divine qualities which are accorded to the human body among the Alevis.[123]

Figure 13. Movements performed to realize a *dâr* standing: Kinetograph by Sinibaldo De Rosa.

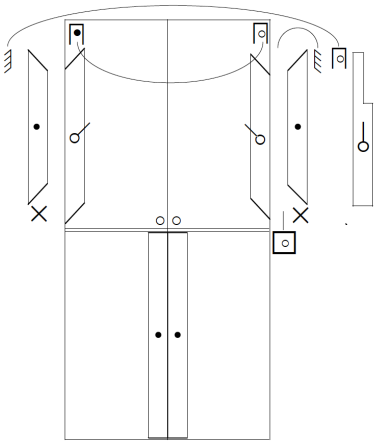
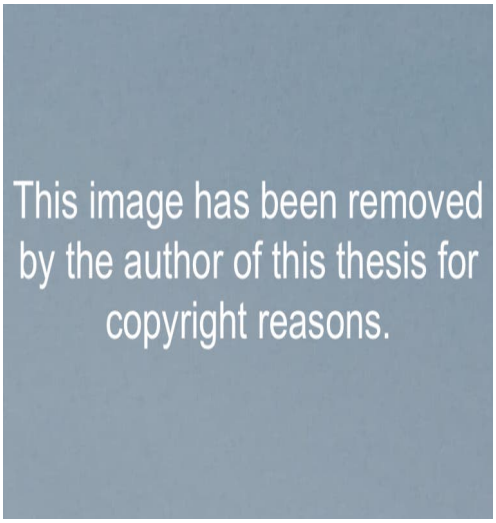


Figure 14. Portrait of the saint Kaygusuz Abdal while standing in the *dâr*, Tekkeköy, Antalya. Source: Doğal Alpaslan Demir (2017) (following page).

[123] In a recorded interview, the researcher and actor Yusuf Sağlam (2010), explained that standing in the *dâr* (*dârda durmak*) during the *ayn-i cem* indicates a surrender to God's will with one's soul, body and spirit. More recently, Dönmez et al. (2018), who translate *dâr* in English as 'abode', offered an exegesis of the practices, meanings and variations associated to the concept of *dâr* within different Alevi-Bektaşi branches. Zarcone discusses the term (and the posture) in reference to the symbolic death in Bektaşi initiatory rituals (2016:790-797). As we shall see further in Chapter 5, the enactment of the *dâr* in *Kardeşlik Töreni – Samah* contributes to the ambiguity of the dramatic reconstruction of the ritual to work as a ritual itself.



Finally, Laban Motif Description rather than the Kinetography has been used for the analysis of *"biz"*, the choreographic piece that will be discussed in the 7th chapter. In many ways, this piece transgresses several of the most common *semah* conventions that will be presented in the final section of this chapter. Whereas these forms typically emphasize the mixing of the two genders, the absence of bodily contact and spontaneity (Dinçer 2004:339-347 had already noticed a tendency towards uniformity), *"biz"* is developed by a team made by three male movers making a specific use of contact improvisation technique.[124] The improvisatory qualities of the piece make analysis through Laban Motif Description the most appropriate tool among the other Laban-derived methods.[125] Without specifying all details of the movements as if they were meant to be reproduced exactly in the same way, an analysis through Laban Motif Description entails

[124] See Fahriye Dinçer's thesis for a discussion of the disfavour for all-men and all-women *semah* public performances (2004:340-342), the lack of touch (342-344) and the lack of improvisation (346-347).

[125] To sustain the idea that there is not a neutral tool to analyse dance Susan Foster Leigh (2005:22-23) has questioned the usefulness to use Labanotation to look at contact improvisation and at improvisation in dance more generally. Whereas I agree that the choice of the analytic tool certainly influences the resulting profile of the dance and there is not a neutral method as such, I am convinced that choosing Labanotation to analyse danced improvisations would be in fact both impracticable and unrewarding.

attention to the most significant aspects of the sequences. In this case, the analysis is limited to detailing some specific 'constrictions' since these define, negatively, a field of possibility for the movements to be articulated. Laban Motif Description symbols enables to comment on the nature and quality of the body contacts established between the dancers (what body parts are involved? What is their timing?), which is one of the most crucial elements that stands out in the overall movement composition.

Looking at *"biz"* through Laban Motif Description led me to question the importance and centrality of the collective hug that closes the execution of the *semah*s during a ritual. The assumption that devotees do not touch each other during the *semah*s is in fact challenged when we consider the collective closing hug which normally indicates their ending. During the ritual, the *semahcılar* would hug each other with bust curved forward and then bow in front of the *dede* and the *zakir* to ask, as a cohesive group, for the *semah* to be 'accepted' as religious duty. If we consider this hugging as part of the *semah* structures themselves, the notion that touch is avoided does thus not stand anymore.[126] In *"biz",* a hug happens at the very beginning of the piece and is not oriented out of the group of performers, instigating the subsequent kinesthetic articulations of the trio. Using Laban Motif Description, I thus reflected on these dynamics of touch, and I tried to make sense of the space dynamics established by the movers (i.e. the fact that their circling trajectories seem to follow paths which mostly evolve on an counter-clockwise direction, as would be the case in most of the *semah*s), of some of their convulsive and whirling movements (*çark*).

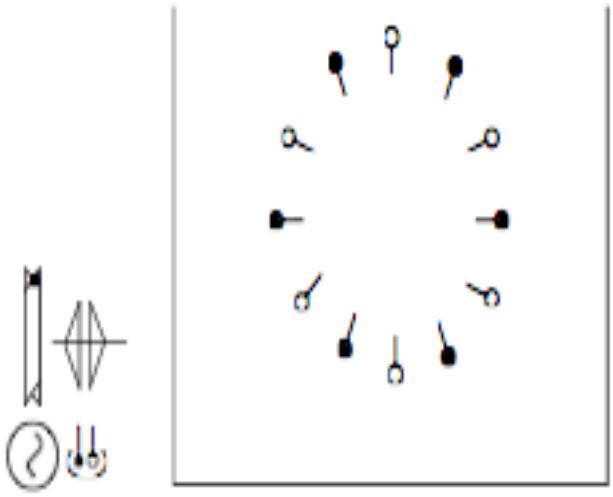
[126] I wish to thank Françoise Arnaud-Demir here for bringing my attention to this point.

4.7 Recurring morphologies in the *semah*s

As we have seen in Chapter 3, the *semah*s are most often performed by men and women together. This gender mixture is a recurring theme in the discussion of the *semah*s in liturgical as well as in scholarly literature. This is also one of the 'rules' detected by Dinçer in 2004, through which the *semah*s were standardized in the attempt of Alevi groups to define themselves as 'modern' vis-à-vis their Sunni counterparts and at the same time protect their respectability against the prejudices and accusations of immorality. Accordingly, the mixture of men and women is not casual but it conforms to the convention of ideally alternating the men to the women in the circle. Even when this may not be the case, and there may a majority of men or women in the group, the *semah*cıs would still try to organize so that each woman precedes and follows a man and vice versa. Often, the *semahcı*s are oriented towards the centre of the circle. The following floor plan (fig. 15) provides a clear capture of this typical circular organization of the group, into which all facing signs display their front to the centre of the circle and each white pin representing a woman  is placed next to a black pin representing a man  . It is useful to think of these facing signs as indicating a body (the black or white bean) with the little pin attached indicating where the nose is oriented. If we look at the preliminary signs on the left of the floor plan, we understand that the group is composed by a generic number  (the reversed *S* indicating the sign of 'ad libitum', here placed inside the circle that indicates the number of movers) of couples of a man and a woman  . Their organization as a circle is defined by the rotation symbol  on whose upper side a dot indicates that

the *semahcı*s are displaying their front to the centre of the circle  . The directional signs for left and right  barred by a horizontal line  indicate that the couples are organized one next to the other in the circle.

Figure 15. Recurring circular organization of the group. Preliminary signs and floor plan by Sinibaldo De Rosa (following page).



Another common situation is one into which a group of gender mixed *semahcı*s are organized on a line progressing counter-clockwise, thus displaying their left side towards the centre, ideally each man being preceded and followed by a woman, and vice versa, as in the following floor plan (fig.16). The preliminary signs here indicate that a generic number of couples composed by a man and woman   are organized on a circle  and that they are displaying the left sides of their bodies towards the centre of it  . In order to do this they organize on a line as it is indicated by the directional sign for front  barred by a vertical line  as well as

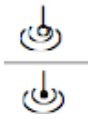
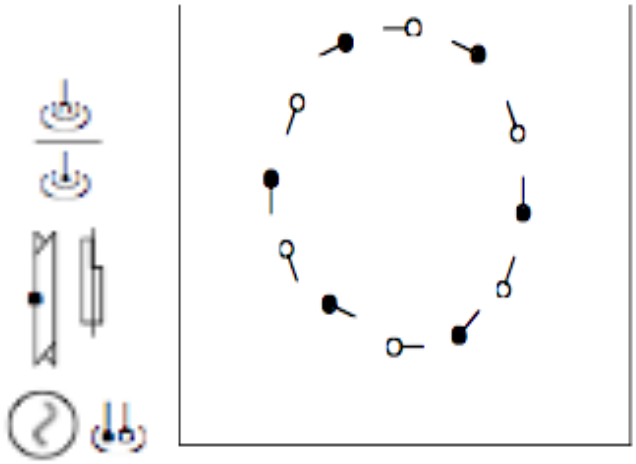
by the more specific suggestion that each woman  is placed ahead of a man (‘each man’ ) as in  (of course, it is thus possible to deduce that each man is also ahead of each woman).

Figure 16. Recurring circular organization of the group. Preliminary signs and floor plan by Sinibaldo De Rosa (following page).



Less frequently however, the group may include individuals of the same gender only, as described in the following floor plans (fig. 17). Less frequent are also *semah*s performed by a single couple of a man/woman couple or by groups organized on two lines of men and women facing each other (*karşılama*) (fig. 18).

Figure 17. All male and all femaie circular organizations. Preliminary signs and floor plans by Sinibaldo De Rosa.

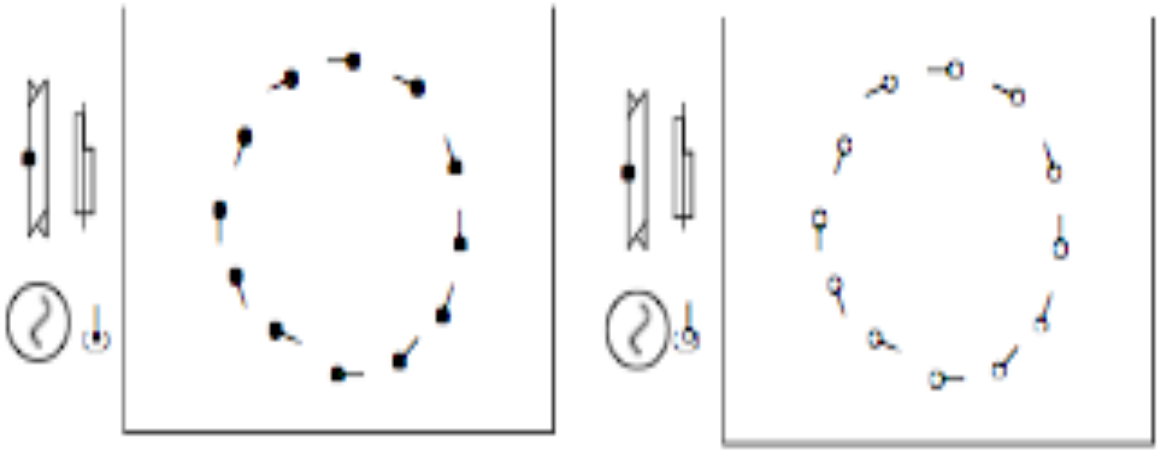
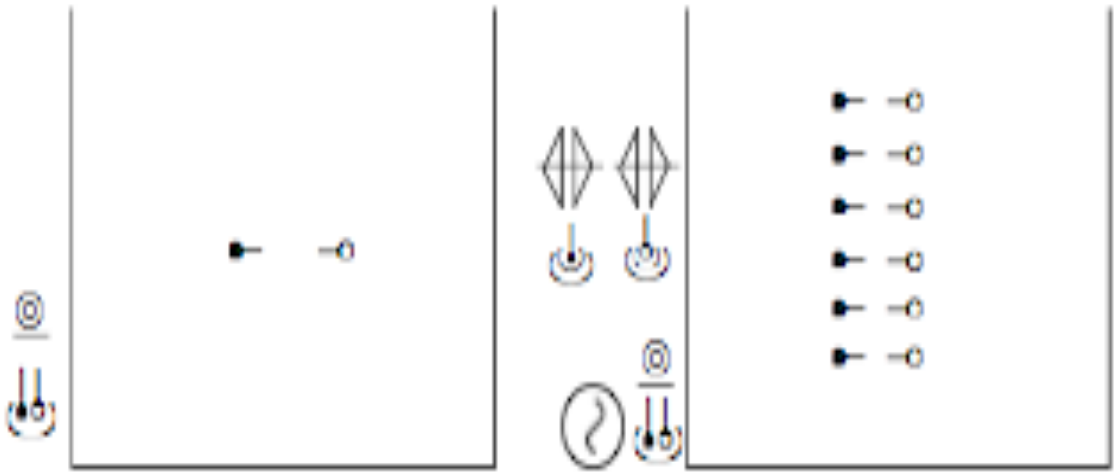


Figure 18. Men and women facing each other: *karşılama*. Preliminary signs and floor plans by Sinibaldo De Rosa.

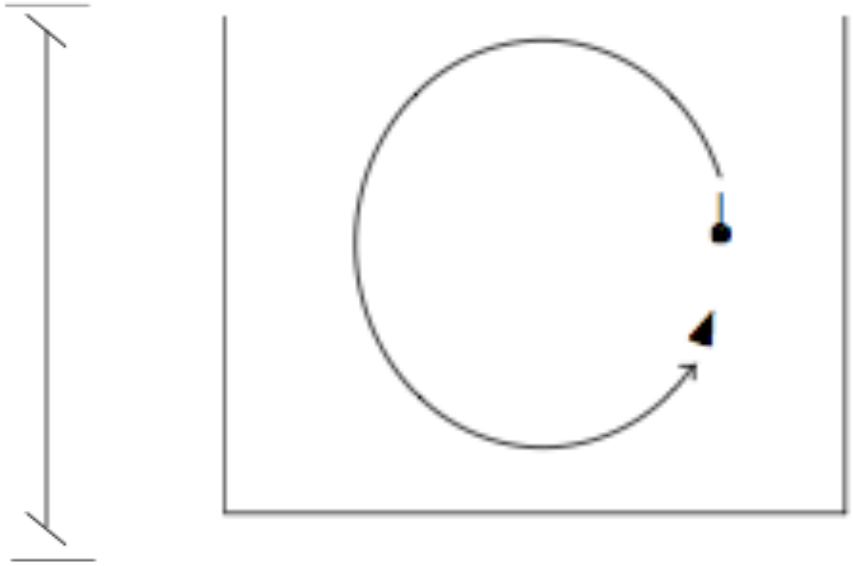


The preliminary signs presented here includes a sign composed of two concentric circles  indicating 'each person'. This is placed above a horizontal line to indicate that each person is in front of another one; in this case, each woman being in front of a man and vice versa. In the case of the *karşılama* the directional signs for left and right barred by a horizontal line  placed above the sign for 'each woman'  informs that that each woman is placed next to another woman,

and the same goes for each man. The group is thus organized in two subgroups of women and men organized on two lines that face each other.

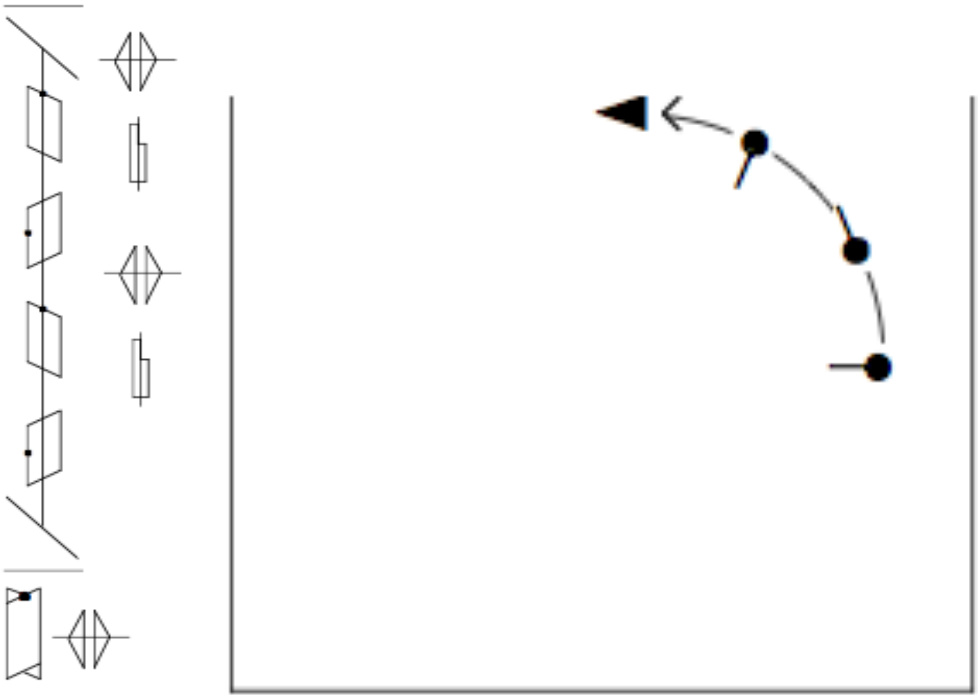
Typically, the *semahcı*s trace a circular trajectory on the floor (fig. 19). The most common displacement is the one of turning together around the centre of a circle (*daire*) on an counter-clockwise direction, as captured by a circular path oriented towards the left [.[127] Since all the *semahcı*s take the same circular trajectory, it suffices here to indicate this spatial movement as tracked by one *semahcı*'s pathway only. A triangular facing pin visualizes the spatial orientation of the *semahcı* at the end of the path.

Figure 19. Circular path on counter-clockwise direction and floor plan by Sinibaldo De Rosa.



[127] In a Kinetography Laban score, this circular path would be placed on the most external right side of the staff to indicate that all displacements and gestures described in the score need to be altered in order to respect the instruction of designing this specific circular path on the floor. The use of this trajectory sign is presented on its own as it is normally done in Laban Motif Description (or *Symbolisation* as this system is called in France), a later system of movement notation which borrows the signs and basic notions of the Kinetography Laban in order to describe core elements of a movement or its guiding intentions without specifying all the exact details of its execution.

Figure 20. Circular path on counter-clockwise direction while pivoting and floor plan by Sinibaldo De Rosa.

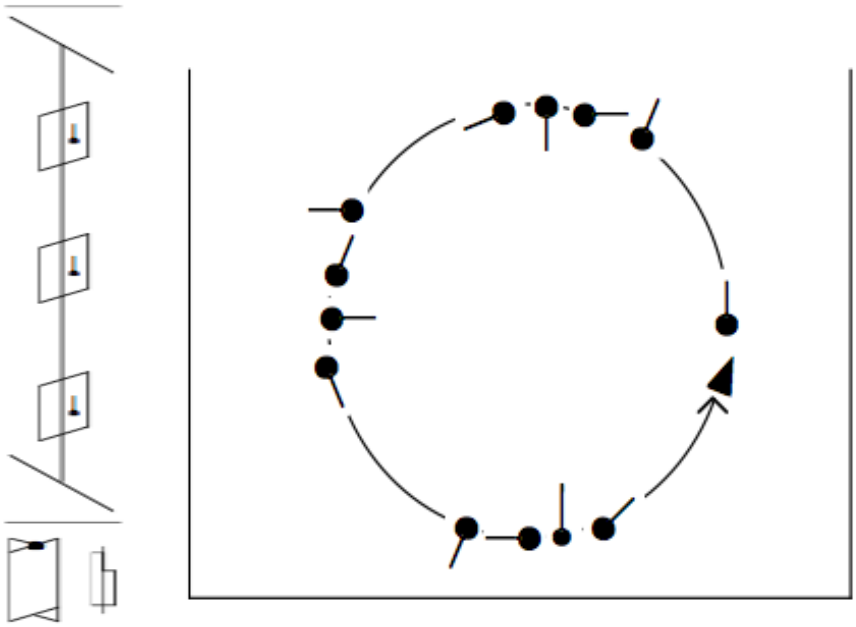


Often the *semahcı*s change they focal orientation by pivoting while progressing on the circular path. To represent this shift, we need to add some extra rotation signs to the circular path (fig. 20). The additional rotation signs (to the left  and to the right ) placed on the longer circular path indicate these supplementary pivot turns. The dots on these rotations signs indicate the shift of focal orientation of the *semahcı*s in their relation to the centre of the circle: a dot placed on the left side of the rotation sign indicating that the left side of the body is oriented towards the centre of the circle, and a dot placed on the upper side of the rotation sign indicating that the front of the body is oriented towards it). These turns result in a shift in the organization of the group as indicated through extra signs

placed next to the main staff: the one indicating that the *semahcı*s are one next to the other  or one in front of the other  .

Sometimes, while advancing on the circular counter-clockwise path the *semahcı*s may also execute a complete tour pivot. This is often on a clockwise direction as represented in the following floor plan (fig. 21). In this case, an additional pin  is placed inside the rotation sign  in order to indicate the degree of the tour pivot, here a complete tour of 360 degrees. Of course, because of the concurrent progression on the circular path, this will not be an effective complete tour.

Figure 21. Circular path on counter-clockwise direction while executing a complete tour pivot and floor plan by Sinibaldo De Rosa.



While progressing on the circular path, often the circle may slightly shrink and then get back to its original size as represented in the following floor plan indicating

group movements (fig. 22). To describe this resizing of the circle, it suffices to give one additional information next to the main staff. This is an encircled quantity sign for ‘big’ ⊗, placed on the top area of a ‘crescendo’ sign ⟨, followed by its cancellation ∧. Here the triangular pin visualizes the spatial orientation of the *semahcı*s at the end of the shrinking of the circle and then at the end of its resizing to the initial size. If we look at the trajectory of a single *semahcı* during this shrinking and resizing of the circle, this would be its likely representation (fig. 23).

Figure 22. Shrinking and enlarging of the circle, and floor plans by Sinibaldo De Rosa.

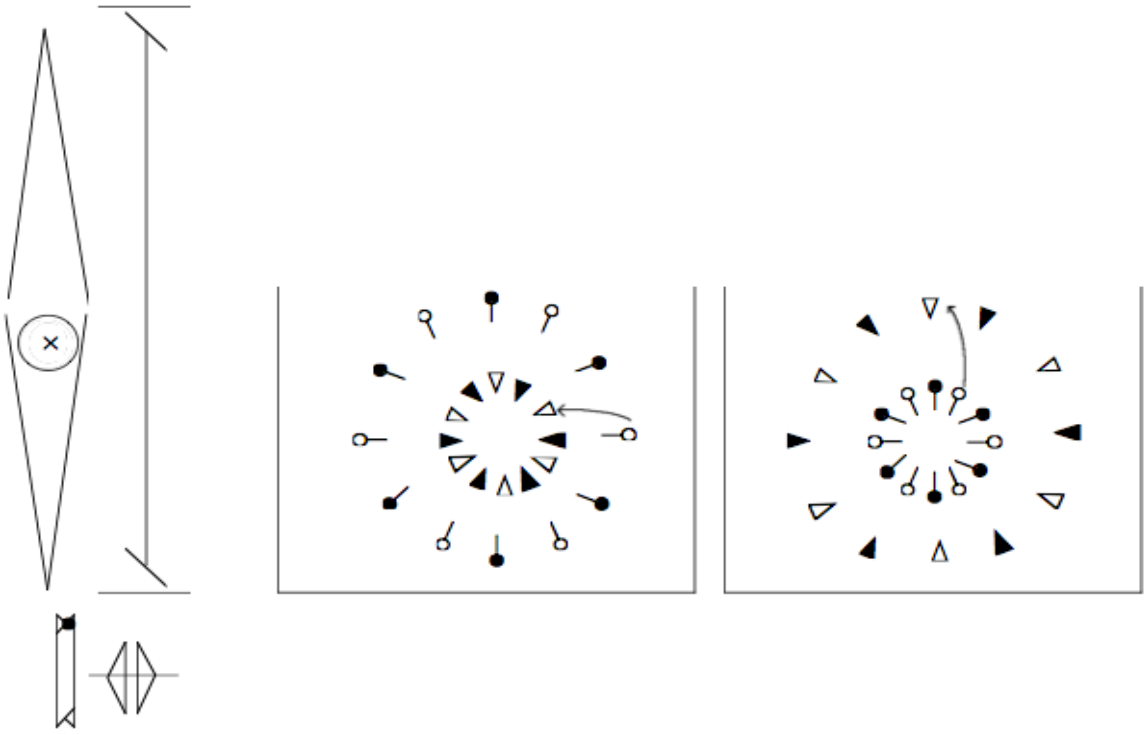
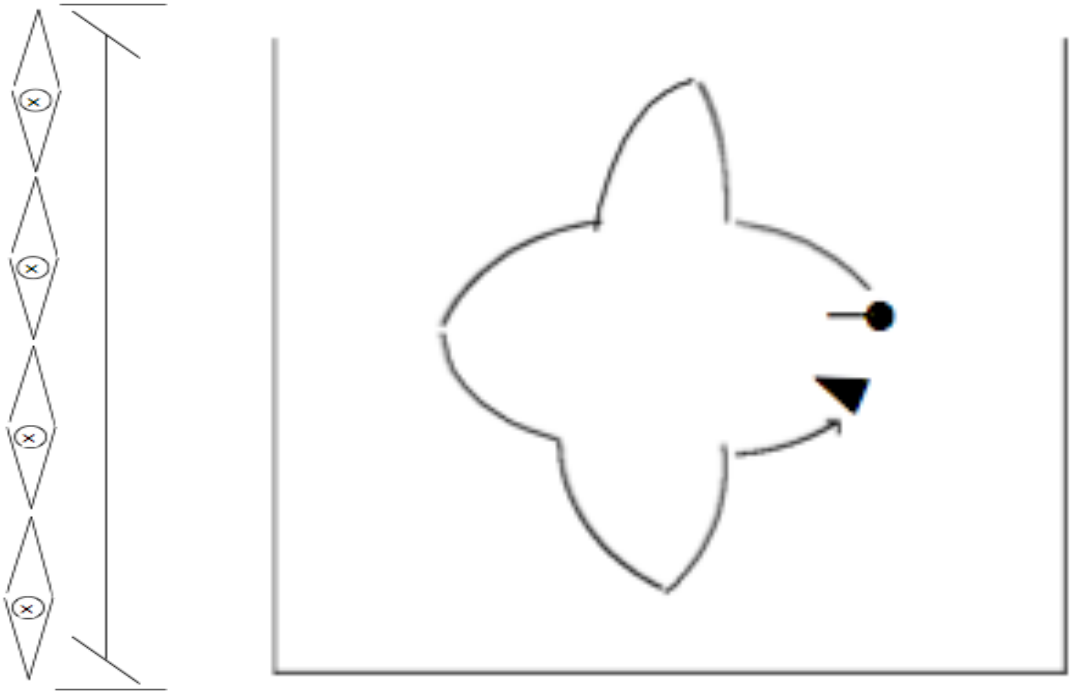


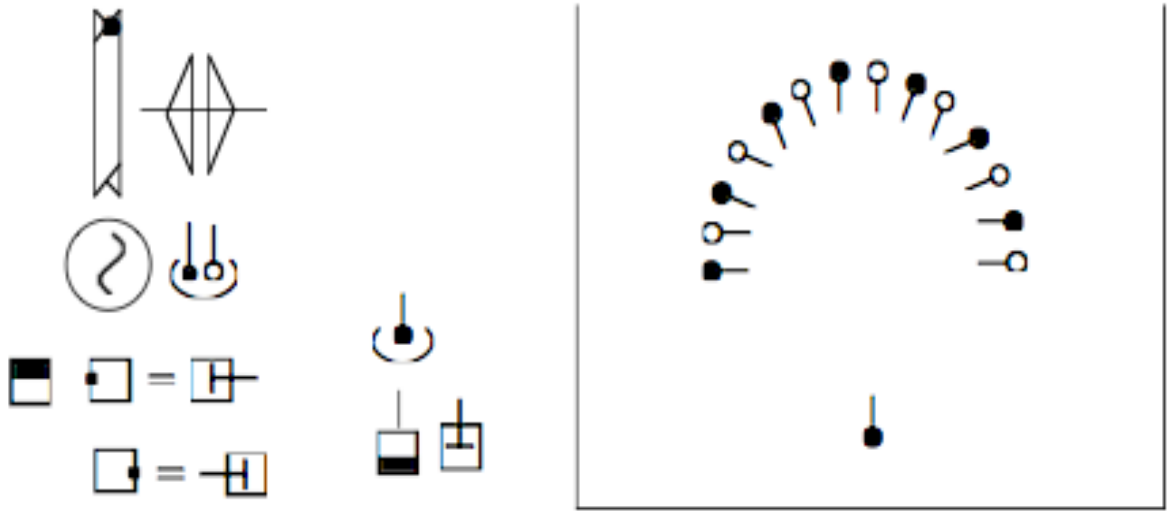
Figure 23. Path of a single *semahcı* and floor plan by Sinibaldo De Rosa.



The centre of the circle constitutes a very important focal point for the movements of the group, however another crucial element that determines movements through space is the place occupied by the *dede* and the *zakir*s. Habitually, at the start and at the end of the *semah*s, and sometimes also during it, the circle may open on the side into which the dede and the *zakir*s sit, so that the spatial organization becomes more similar to a semicircle. While on this spatial organization, the *semahcı*s takes care not to display their back to the *dede* and thus stay all oriented towards him (fig. 24). We need to specify here the positioning and focal orientation of the *semahcı*s and their spatial relation to the *dede* (in this case the *zakir*s have not been represented). It sufficed thus to say that the group is occupying the front area of the 'stage' and to specify the positioning and space orientation of the *semahcı*s occupying the two extremities of the semicircle: the one at the right extremity who is facing left and the one at the left

extremity who is facing right . The *dede* is occupying the central back area of the 'stage' and he is oriented toward the *semahcı*s and the 'audience' .

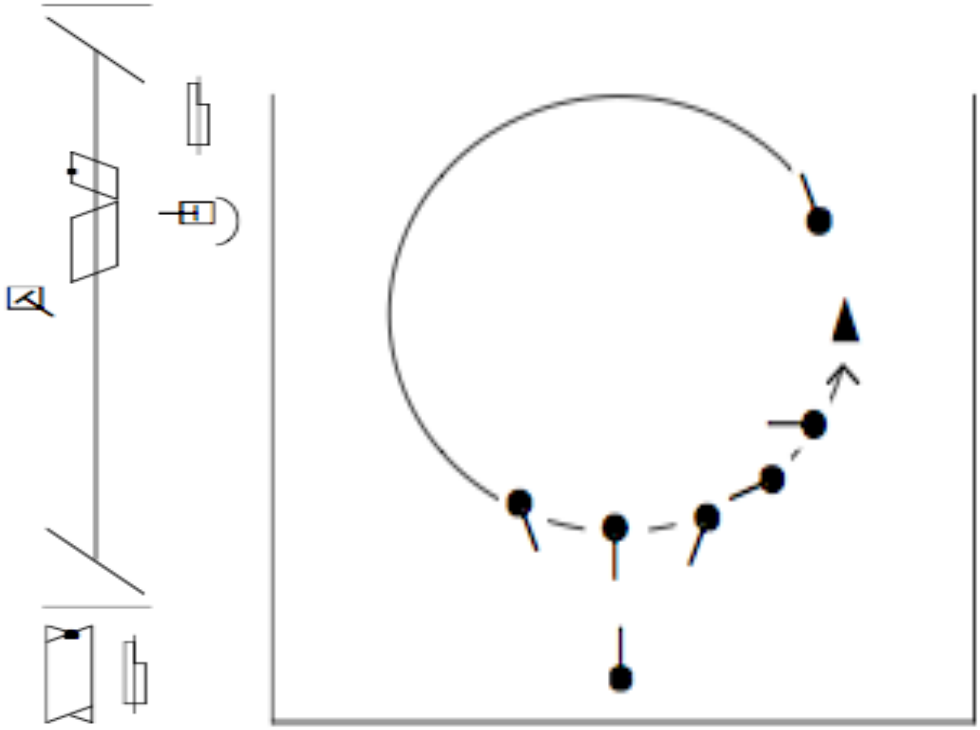
Figure 24. Opening of the circle towards the *dede*. Preliminary signs and floor plans by Sinibaldo De Rosa.



Very often the *semhacı*s avoid displaying their back to the *dede* also when they get closer to the place occupied by him and lower their torso to perform a prayer (*niyaz*) (fig. 25). This lowering of the torso occurs when the group is organized as a line progressing on the circular path. The *semahcı* realizes the *niyaz* by starting a pivot tour on a clockwise direction as soon as he gets closer to the area occupied by the *dede*, that is when his body is oriented on a back-right direction while progressing on the circular path. After the *semahcı* has passed in front of the *dede* keeping her front oriented towards him, she would quickly pivot back on the counter-clockwise direction to display again the left side of the body towards the

centre. The common organization of the group on a line with each *semahcı* ahead of another one would thus be re-established.

Figure 25. *Niyaz* to the *dede* while progressing on the circle. Path and floor plan by Sinibaldo De Rosa.



4.8 Conclusions

In this chapter I discussed how my studies in dance anthropology and training in the Kinetography Laban shaped the methodology used for gathering, producing and delivering knowledge about the *semah*s' staged adaptations. Reflecting critically on how application of this methodology influenced my perception and understanding of the topic, in I defined my procedural style as 'critical Kinetography'. The commitment to exploring the *semah*s as a movement

system meant that I tried to seriously engage in the description and analysis of the formal aspects of the movement. This commitment worked as a premise to think through several epistemological questions on how to best appreciate the *semah* as a coherent system of kinetic knowledge. The chapter thus explains in which ways this critical approach led me to try and circumvent a simplistic dichotomy of resorting to the Kinetography as the scientific/etic method *for researching* and the *semah* as the etic/emic matter *to be researched*, but rather to try and establish a dialogue between the two.

Before discussing the details of my approach however, I discussed the relationship between dance, movement and calligraphy in Islamic contexts and assessed the history and developments in the practice of movement notation in contemporary Turkey. More specifically, I examined two previously successful approaches that were developed to document and *scripturalize* the Alevi *semah*s in the performing arts sector. The first of these approaches was conceived in 1982 by Belgin Aygün as part of her dissertation on the *semah*s within the ritual contexts discussed for a degree in Drama at Ankara University; the second used Benesh movement notation and appeared on the Alevi monthly journal *Nefes* in 1993 as part of a dossier focusing on the *semah*s by the scholar and choreographer Nasuh Barın. Reflecting on the need and modalities of discussing body movement systems in the humanities and social sciences and on the recourse to movement notation across several national and international trends, I thus questioned how the dissemination of these notations among Alevi and non-Alevi audiences, and especially among scholars and performing artists, was endeavoured as a contribution to the Alevi cause.

Subsequently, an outline of my experience in witnessing and practicing the

*semah*s since 2009 served to detail the gains and pitfalls of resorting to the Kinetography Laban during ethnographic fieldwork. To do this, my choices have been contrasted to the usages and assessments of movement notation in anthropology and ethnochoreology by other scholars before me (especially, Carbone 1989; Farnell 2012; 1995 and 1994; Foley 2012 and Johnson Jones 1999). My self-reflective approach thus led me to ask questions regarding ethnocentricism, scholarly performance and mental resilience inherent in the use of notation during and after fieldwork. For instance, I suggested that whereas the Kinetography is grounded on an implicit process of 'movement individualization', the *semah*s encourage a process of 'movement collectivization' and I specified how the use of the Kinetography helped me gain credibility and at the same time cope with the emotional charge experienced in the equivocal and vulnerable conduction of ethnographic fieldwork.

Finally, in this chapter I specified how I borrowed from different Laban-related methodologies beyond the Kinetography Laban, such as Laban Motif Description and Laban Movement Analysis, to discuss the different staged adaptations of the *semah*s throughout the thesis. Through notation, I overviewed here some of the most recurring formal aspects in the *semah*s that I encountered throughout fieldwork. Especially, I focused on bodily configurations and typical postures, such as the *dâr*, and typical spatial dynamics. This overview wished thus to be useful for the reader to better appreciate the kinetic adaptations undertaken within the three case studies discussed in the second part of the thesis.