

ARTICLE

Değiş in transmission: Alevi poetry and music as religious tradition

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Abstract

Religious poems sung with music, the Alevi *değiş* are an integral part of Alevi ritual and social life. Due to the dynamics of oral transmission, the same *değiş* can be performed with all kinds of music, the words of the *değiş* can change from one performance to the next, and pen names can multiply. The unique experiential function of the *değiş* lies precisely in this dynamic and fluid plurality. The *değiş* serve as the anchor of communal identity, linking the group to a mythico-historical past that also constitutes the hermeneutical background for making sense of the present and near past. Born from an affect that is at once personal and communal, the oral tradition of *değiş* is an experience of collective and personal agency, re-created at each moment in the acts of performance and active listening. Grounded in conceptual frameworks on emotion, embodiment, and orality, the article explores the transmission of *değiş* through the cases of early Republican singer–poet Âşık Veysel (d. 1973), poems by Kaygusuz Abdal (flourished late fourteenth–early fifteenth century) and Pir Sultan Abdal (flourished sixteenth century) in the compilation of Ottoman palace musician Ali Ufuki (d. 1675), and modern musical interpretations of Kaygusuz Abdal’s poem.

Keywords: Alevi; Bektashi; *değiş*; orality; performance

Introduction

Accept, to begin, that tradition is the creation of the future out of the past.
(Glassie 1995, 395)

Eminent folklorist Henry Glassie begins his article titled “Tradition” with these poetic lines, subverting the notion of “tradition” as a dynamic of conservation. Highlighting tradition as a temporal process, Glassie sees it as the “swing term” between culture and history, the “volitional, temporal action” that creates both (Glassie 1995, 409). This perspective has much to offer us in defining Alevi music and poetry as temporal actions that simultaneously create history, identity, and religious

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belief. Although Alevi singer-poets (*âşiks*) carry a unique responsibility in the making of tradition, the listeners and non-professional performers of the given artistic traditions are also actors who create tradition as they pass it along. The important question that anchors this paper is how this act of both creation and transmission is determined by the medium itself. As primary sources of Alevi religious tradition, Alevi music and poetry carry an affective dimension that is reinforced through performance and active listening, creating individual and collective agency. We will investigate the role of the Alevi *deyiş* (hymns, lit. “saying”) in creating and maintaining Alevi identity, in the plurality of its forms and contexts. In understanding the *deyiş* itself as a communicative process, we will question how religious, artistic, and historical knowledge are formed and passed on through the medium of the Alevi *deyiş*.

We use the word Alevi *deyiş* as an umbrella term to cover the poetic traditions of many different communities, such as the Kizilbash, Bektashis, Abdals, etc. The term Alevi does not indicate a homogeneous community, tradition, or belief system. On the contrary, we place particular emphasis on diversity. We examine the poetry and music traditions that different communities accept as common, without giving primacy to any one definition of Alevi and Alevism. The reason we discuss these communities collectively, despite the ritual differences (*sürekl*) between them, is that they all embrace a common poetic tradition. The Alevi *deyiş* are a body of religious poetry that is sung with music.¹ Other less common terms for the *deyiş* include *ayet* (lit. “sign,” also name for a Qur’anic verse) and *nefes* (lit. “breath”). The word *nefes* is used mostly for Bektashi songs.² Often with esoteric content, the *deyiş* have strong links to Sufi poetry, such as some shared subgenres and vocabulary. Yet even beyond their unique ritual contexts, the *deyiş* can be distinguished from Sufi and Shi’i literature as well as other genres of the *âşık* tradition by their religious symbolism, terminology, and aesthetic dimensions.

Underlining the relationship between the act of breathing and the Alevi *nefes*, Maja Bjelica (2021, 1006) argues that the word *nefes* refers not only to songs but rather to a multiplicity of Alevi religious practices holding the saints’ spiritual power and guidance. One example is the hagiography of the famous saint Hacı Bektaş, where his breath is frequently claimed to have the power to kill or give life, or lead the spiritual awakening of its recipient (Duran 2007). We can also extend this notion of *nefes* to the terms *deyiş* and *ayet*, as indicating the acts of saying, calling, or breathing. The terms thus denote sacred speech as spiritual power.

The *deyiş* have been in circulation for centuries in a wide geography from the Balkans to the Middle East. Although some Alevi *deyiş* were written down in various formats over the centuries, they have mostly been passed down orally. Written sources on the *deyiş* include the *mecmua* or *cönk*, poetry collections in manuscript

¹ The word *deyiş* is used for both plural and singular versions of the word, i.e. the body of *deyiş* as well as a single *deyiş*.

² The Bektashis were initially a dervish group and became the official Bektashi order in the early sixteenth century. The order is often referred to as the Babagan branch of Bektashism (Noyan 1998), while adherers to the family of Hacı Bektaş, the eponym of the order, known as Çelebis, form a distinct group (Yıkımsı 2014). Still active in contemporary Turkey, both groups have historically been closely connected to Alevi in terms of doctrine and practice.

form (Karolewski 2020).³ Although the mecmua and cönk (manuscript miscellanies) existed as early as the fifteenth century, most of the mecmua and cönk that have come down to us belong to the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, indicating that they proliferated during this time (Gökyay 1993). The early twentieth century saw a continuation of this process, which brought about the early anthologies collected during the Republican period. These invaluable sources on the singer-poet tradition relied on both oral and written sources (Ergun 1944; Gölpınarlı 1963; Karadeniz and Akbulut 2022). Among these sources, Bektashi mecmuas received particular focus.

Carried out by the heirs of the early folklorists, contemporary studies on the deyiş continue the tradition of compiling valuable literary and musical material. Yet they exhibit a disciplinary divide that prevents a thorough examination of the subject in its ritual and sociocultural contexts. The main literary scholarship on the Alevi deyiş includes poetry anthologies. Although they are important sources, these anthologies naturally strip the text from the musical compositions that traditionally accompany them. Moreover, they rarely give information on the written historical source (the manuscript or early anthology) they rely on, and entirely omit information on the reciter or context when the poems are orally compiled. On the other hand, studies on the musical features of the Alevi deyiş focus on transcribing the musical notations of Alevi deyiş collected from various people and regions (Duygulu 1997; Yaltırık 2002). There has been a shift in recent years, however, as researchers began to underline different dimensions of the Alevi deyiş and especially their role in conveying Alevisism (Carspecken and Özdoğan 2017; Dressler 2003; Kara 2023; Karolewski 2015; Tee 2013).

As two researchers from the fields of literature and ethnomusicology, we will assess the issue together from a multidisciplinary perspective. This will enable us to evaluate music and poetry as a dynamic unity, as they come together in the deyiş, which we often miss when we are bound by the frameworks of our own disciplines. Our investigation will thus highlight the questions that bring our disciplines together: orality, performance, and the sociocultural context, as well as their role in the creation and continuation of tradition.

The deyiş can be heard at almost every moment in Alevi circles, from the *cem* ritual to *muhabbet* environments, from funeral ceremonies to daily activities. The *cem* (from Arabic *jam'*) is the central rite of Alevi communities. Although its content varies according to different ritual needs as well as the sociocultural status of each community, it can be defined as a gathering where certain religious services are performed, women and men come together, the deyiş are played and sung, and ritual dances called *semah* (from Arabic *samā'*) are performed (Özdemir 2016, 53–83). Muhabbet, which we can call a semi-ritual environment, is the general name for almost every meeting where the deyiş are sung, reinforcing the group identity of Alevis. Muhabbets allow for the transmission of multiple aspects of oral tradition, such as discussing the meanings of poems or creating new poems (Işık 2011, 147).

³ The word mecmua denotes any manuscript that contains more than one work, but in this context the word has the specialized meaning of *şiiir mecmuası* (poetry collection). The word cönk (coming from the Javan and Malaysian word *djong*) denotes a small notebook. Cönk is also defined as a mecmua that opens vertically instead of horizontally (Koz 2012).

Throughout these evolving contexts, the *deyiş* serve as the anchor of communal identity, linking the group to a mythico-historical past that also constitutes the hermeneutical background for making sense of the present and near past. Music and poetry together thus act as a medium of religious learning through the emotions they evoke. A similar perspective is brought forth by Rebecca Sachs Norris regarding dance:

Just as postures and gestures of a given culture are learned through imitation, usually during childhood, so are emotions and feelings. . . . Emotions, once learned through imitation, often become mechanical, so associations that evoke or follow on a certain emotion are automatically linked (Norris 2001, 113).

As also underlined by Norris, Paul Ekman (1977) stresses that memories and images that are associated with emotions become part of an “affect programme.” This leads them to be experienced habitually and automatically together with the emotions that evoke them (Ekman 1977, 57). Affect thus carries a type of historical knowledge that is embedded in one’s senses. The *deyiş* exemplify a holistic practice of tradition that links the collective past to a personal and collective present. This dynamic link is made up of an intellectual understanding of the poem, an aesthetic appreciation of the music and words, and an emotional response to the poem’s content. Born from an affect that is at once personal and communal, tradition thus creates an experience of collective and personal agency, whereby it is re-created at each moment in the acts of performance and active listening.

This role of music in creating agency is highlighted by Clyde J. Steckel, who underlines the role of music in the making of religious experience. Steckel discusses three aspects of the theological significance of music:

- (1) In expressing experiences of divine encounter . . .
- (2) In envisioning alternative domains of experience . . .
- (3) In transforming the lives of participants in musical experience, and thus transforming the culture in which musical experience occurs toward a fuller manifestation of the extraordinary realities experienced in music (Steckel 1994, 14).

Music thus creates an experiential framework that opens room for the possibility and intelligibility of religious experience. Collective agency rests on the transformative power of music and poetry as the anchors of ritual.

Grounded in conceptual frameworks on emotion, embodiment, and orality, this article explores the role of the Alevi *deyiş* tradition in shaping Alevi identity. We will question the functions of affect in personal and collective experience, while underlining how historical consciousness is constructed in the process. We will then investigate the dynamics of oral transmission through a broad look at the use of the pen name (*mahlas*) together with a few case studies: the *deyiş* repertoire of famous singer-poet Âşık Veysel (1894–1973), followed by the *deyiş* by Kaygusuz Abdal (flourished late fourteenth–early fifteenth century) and Pir Sultan Abdal (flourished sixteenth century) that figure in the compilation of Ottoman palace musician Ali

Ufuki (1610–1675). Our final example will consist of four modern musical interpretations of the poem by Kaygusuz Abdal. As these cases will demonstrate, the dynamic understanding of tradition that is anchored in orality has a rhizomatic character that is non-hierarchical and non-linear. The same *deyiş* can be performed with all kinds of music, the words of the *deyiş* can change from one performance to the next, and pen names can change. The unique experiential function of the *deyiş* lies precisely in this dynamic and fluid plurality.

The Alevi *deyiş* between poetry and music

The Alevi *deyiş* have a form in which poetry and music intertwine. The main musical elements in the *deyiş* repertoire are based on poems. In other words, although the Alevi *deyiş* can be transmitted verbally or in writing, traditionally this transmission occurs through musical performance. Emphasizing the distinction between music and text in the formation of Alevi music, Ayhan Erol (2009, 133) reminds us that texts are the only tools that ensure the unity of Alevi music. Thus, we can say that Alevi poetry forms the basis for the emergence of music. The poems are coupled with such a variety of melodic expressions that each performance of a poem creates a different music. Thus, in different regions the same Alevi poem is performed with different music and similar tunes are performed with different poems. This diversity has emerged through the circulation of poetry and music among Alevi communities who have lived in different regions for centuries and have relations with each other at different levels (Özdemir 2018a, 179). What we have is a tradition that is constantly evolving in great variety.

The historical evolution of the literary form of the *deyiş* remains obscure. The most common element in the poems' textual form is the quatrain, a formal aspect that probably became prevalent from the sixteenth century onwards with the rise of the *âşık* (minstrel) tradition (Karamustafa 2023). Early fifteenth-century precedents from Bektashi poetry, such as those of Kaygusuz Abdal and Sadık Abdal, often keep to the Islamicate form of the couplet, although in some poems inner rhyme allowed couplets to be broken down into quatrains during oral recitation.⁴ Another distinguishing formal aspect of the *deyiş* is the use of the syllabic meter, which once again distinguishes the *deyiş* tradition from cosmopolitan Islamic precedents originating from Arabic and Persian poetry.⁵

Although the *deyiş* were mostly in the repertoires of *âşık*s who did not put their poems into writing, some Bektashi and Abdal poets were an exception to this. The term *abdal* denoted members of the antinomian Sufi group Abdals of Rum (Anatolia) as well as some Kizilbash poets (Karamustafa 1994, Karamustafa 2014, Oktay 2020). For instance, the seventeenth-century poet Virani Abdal composed written works and has a *Divan* (poetry collection by a single author) (Oktay-Uslu 2020a). In such cases, the same poem lived in both oral and written universes, with different rules

⁴ The use of the quatrain in the *âşık* tradition suggests an affinity with pre-Islamic Turkic precedents, although we do not have enough evidence to suggest continuity in this regard.

⁵ Generally, folk poetry uses *hece* meter (syllabic meter based on the counting of syllables) and court poetry uses prosodic meter (*aruz*) originating from Arabic literature. However, there are also genres of *âşık* literature that use the latter, although these are still sung to the accompaniment of a musical instrument.

of transmission, thus resulting in further variety. It was also common for poems not found in divans to become part of oral repertoires under the name of that poet, never being written by the poet in question. Poems attributed to Shah İsmail (1487–1524) are the most famous example of this (Arslanoğlu 1992; Csirkès 2015; Gallagher 2018).

Sacred texts of Alevism named *buyruks* dating back to the sixteenth century contain some *deyiş* bound together with the *buyruk* texts. The term *buyruk* is a general designation for works that convey the core principles of Alevism, along with various Sufi teachings, through Quranic references and narratives about Muhammad and ‘Ali b. Abi Talib. Although this label does not appear within the manuscripts themselves, it is sometimes applied to the entire manuscript (which consists of multiple texts) and at other times to the longest treatise within the collection (Bisâtî 2003, 1–10; Karakaya-Stump 2010). The *buyruks* are separated into two groups, as the teachings of Shaykh Safi or of Imam Ja’far. The poems of Kaygusuz Abdal, Nesimi, and Hatayi are found in a *buyruk* from the Shaykh Safi group with a seventeenth-century date (Bisâtî 2003, 83–91). Similarly, a poem by Virani Abdal appears in a *buyruk* belonging to the Imam Ja’far group (Bozkurt 2011, 289–290). While the *buyruks* were a rare source of oral poetry, the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries marked an important breaking point. This was the first time that the *deyiş* were written down in a systematic fashion in poetry collections in the form of *mecmua* or *cönk*. As numerous written compilations of different kinds of oral poetry emerged, music and text gradually separated, resulting in early Republican anthologies, and consequently the above-mentioned disciplinary divide.

While the Alevi *deyiş* are sung mainly in Turkish, the *deyiş* were also written in many other languages such as Albanian (Yiğit and Dibra 2013) or Kurdish (Bayrak 2015). The *deyiş* repertoire has circulated in different regions and cultures with many different performers such as *âşiks* (singer-poets), *dedes* (Alevi male religious leaders), *anas* (Alevi female religious leaders), and *zakirs* (music performers in Alevi rituals), as well as non-professional performers and popular musicians, all of whom continue to play important roles in transmitting Alevi belief. As the *deyiş* moved beyond its original ritual context with popular musicians, it became a cultural phenomenon in which various populations in Turkey participated, sometimes moving beyond the national context to be embraced by other cultures as well.

The *saz* or *bağlama* (Anatolian lute) is an important memory tool that functions as the foundation of performance in Alevi oral culture and the anchor of its identity (Hendrich 2004, 176). *Saz*, a Persian word meaning instrument, is mostly used to mean instrument in Ottoman/Turkish music, but in folk music and Alevi music cultures it is generally used for long-necked lute instruments (also called *bağlama*). As described in the poems of numerous poets who lived in different periods, starting from Kaygusuz Abdal, *saz*- or *bağlama*-like instruments have played an important mediating role in the performance of Alevi *deyiş*. For this reason, the sanctity of the *saz* is still expressed with the phrase “stringed Koran” (*telli Kuran*) by Alevi communities (Özdemir 2018a, 172). The *saz* reinforces the power of music and poetry for Alevi. The rich musical diversity of Alevi communities living in a wide region is one of the main reasons for the liveliness in the transmission of the Alevi *deyiş*. In this multi-actor universe, the pillar of relations between actors is the *deyiş*.

The *deyiş* as history and identity

The words of the *deyiş* create and perpetuate interpretive communities, groups formed around a collective interpretation of the poetry that is based on shared affect (Oktay-Uslu, 2020a). This act of group formation takes place during performance: during the cem ceremony (the central Alevi rite) or any other social context that brings people together around the ritualistic or artistic appreciation of the *deyiş*. In this physical setting, the *deyiş* themselves, together with the ritualistic acts that are bound to them, anchor the act of coming together as a community. That is, the community is established as a community essentially through a ritualistic experience of the *deyiş*. In the context of the cem, this experience is an embodied one that actualizes each participant's entire knowledge of the Alevi tradition in its historical, religious, and aesthetic aspects.

Markus Dressler (2025) underlines a similar ritual experience in the context of *ziyaret* (Arabic *ziyāra*, the practice of visiting sacred Alevi places). Dressler (2025, 276) argues that for the Alevi tradition, as well as other Islamicate traditions, we must put “emphasis on devotion to sacredness embodied in saints, embodiment of the divine in sacred sites and things, and the affective dimensions of piety.” Similarly, the Alevi belief on the transformation of people to *can* (souls) during the cem ceremony is a metaphor for embodiment, one where the individual becomes the sacred site. This transformation is expressed by the *dede* during ritual and referenced in the poems. The *can* (Persian *jān*) can be defined as a soul stripped of identity, that is no longer gendered, as the soul was during the Preeternal Pact prior to the creation of the universe (Oktay-Uslu 2020b). Yet this is not disembodiment, but a transformation that takes place in the body. As Norris (2001, 115) explains, “transcendence is not a disembodied spiritual experience, however; it is experienced by and in the body. More accurately, it is a state of the body.” This metaphysical transformation to one's initial state of perfection rests on an experience of the *deyiş* that is at once deeply personal and fully communal. Music as the carrier of affect leads this process, because as Steckel (1994, 29) underlines, “participation in musical experience is in itself transforming.”

Cem Kara (2023) demonstrates the array of emotions that are expressed in the *deyiş*, such as sorrow, anger, and love, stressing their role in forming an Alevi community. Kara's list of emotions can be complemented by the array of emotions that are expressed by those who take part in the performance as performers and listeners during the cem ceremony. The relationship between the emotions expressed in the room and those contained in the *deyiş* itself is fascinating. The former includes not only the facial and bodily gestures and ritualistic movements of the listeners, but also the ritualistic acts of those who undertake the *on iki hizmet* (twelve services), the duties performed in Alevi cems that have sacred and esoteric meanings. Let us take two examples: the poetic genres of the *miraçlama* (poetry of the ascension) and *mersiye* (elegy). The first of these contains an account of the Ceremony of the Forty (*kırklar cemi*) that takes place during the Prophet's Ascension according to Alevi lore. According to this account, which forms the mythical archetype of the cem ceremony, the Prophet and the forty saints dance the *semah* (ritual dance). The poetic narration of the mythical *semah* coincides with the actual *semah* in the cem ceremony. This is one of the highest emotional points of the entire ceremony; it expresses itself as a

collective state of rapture. Similarly, the singing of the *mersiye* coincides with the act of mourning for the martyrs at Kerbela, when the Prophet's grandson and his family were slain by the Umayyad army. The water that is distributed at this point stands for the water that was withheld from Husayn's family during the battle, representing the utmost act of cruelty. The collective act of mourning is anchored in the words of the *mersiye*. This is also where collective crying takes place, especially during the anniversary of the events in the month of Muharram.

Both examples demonstrate the cem ceremony as a rich emotional journey that is anchored in the words of the *deyiş* at each moment. As a whole, the embodied experience of the ritual revolves around the *deyiş*. Community is made during ritual, and although the physical community dissolves at the end, the sense of community remains and is perpetuated through a repetition of the *deyiş*. In this regard, each performance of the *deyiş*, whether in a private room or at a public concert, includes a ritualistic element by the very fact that it contains a remembrance of the primary ritual context, that of the Alevi cem. In other words, each performance of the *deyiş* is part of the same "affect programme." This is why the *deyiş* create interpretive communities not only in the actual sense, in a physical setting that brings people together, but also in the imaginative sense, as each Alevi's personal experience of an imagined community. Even during a private act such as the listening of the *deyiş* with one's headphones, the community is always there: as a memory, and as a possibility.

This memory is located in the words of the *deyiş*: For the listener, the very capacity to understand them creates a personal link to a collective past. This "understanding" begins with an understanding of the meanings of the words. In their oral preservation of a poetic tradition dating from the Ottoman period, the *deyiş* preserve a past vocabulary that is no longer in use. Through an Ottoman Turkish (and thus a partly Arabic and Persian) terminology as well as a collection of stylized literary tropes and metaphors, the *deyiş* preserve and perpetuate a particular language. This makes them a rare living heritage of Ottoman Turkish and its literary traditions. The modernization of Turkish literature took shape beginning with the Tanzimat era (the period of administrative and cultural reforms in the Ottoman Empire, starting in 1839), through increasing engagement with Western literary models, leading to the adoption of new genres and forms of expression in place of traditional poetic and narrative structures (Tanpınar 1949; Uslu and Altuğ 2014). This project was imagined as a radical break from the past. Even the academic structure of Turkish Literature in higher education reflects this understanding, whereby premodern and modern literature are understood to be two distinct fields. The role of the *deyiş* as a locus not of radical modernization but of seamless continuation is of utmost importance for our understanding of literary history. The implications of this for our context are clear: the *deyiş* preserve the past by perpetuating a specialized language and aesthetic. Access to this language requires participation in a particular interpretive community.

The earlier examples of the *miraçlama* and the *mersiye* also lay bare the role of the *deyiş* in the preservation and re-creation of historical consciousness. The *deyiş* teach history. From our point of view, this history is both factual and mythical. Yet we can imagine that for the premodern believer, the factual and the mythical were fully merged in that all history was sacred history. The word "re-creation" is key here: it is through the act of re-creation that sacred history is made present. The overlapping of the content of the *deyiş* with the ritual acts in the cem is an instance of re-creation.

Yet this re-creation is not limited to the ritual setting but extends to personal and collective life stories. Hence, the events at Kerbela become the mythical archetype not only of persecution by the Ottoman state, but of modern oppression as well. Each massacre that is remembered, whether it be Maraş or Madımak,⁶ is remembered in relation to the historico-mythical archetype of Kerbela (Zırh 2014, 107). Thus, remembering Kerbela, or historical knowledge itself, serves as the key to a continuous hermeneutical act. The *deyiş*, in preserving the past, create avenues for collectively interpreting the present. This collective hermeneutical effort stands at the core of identity.

One example for the primacy of the *deyiş* for different Alevi groups is the Hakikatçı movement that emerged in the nineteenth century. The Hakikatçı (lit. followers of truth) movement emphasizes face-to-face conversations or muhabbets by singing and playing the Alevi *deyiş* instead of cem ritual-based worship (Özdemir 2018b, 163). This movement, which has so far led to the emergence of many poets (such as Haydari, Meluli, Mücrimi, Afe Ana, etc.) and singer-poets (such as Ali Haki, İbreti, İbrahim Erdem, etc.), introduced the Alevi *deyiş* as a tool to implement their beliefs. Although the leaders of this movement proposed changes to some services in the Alevi cems, they were never against the cem itself. They focused on a *deyiş*-centered understanding of truth instead of cem-centered ritual and argued that this represented a higher stage in the Alevi spiritual hierarchy (Özdemir 2018b, 164–169).

The role of the *deyiş* in the transmission of Alevi identity and religiosity can be best observed in the lives of non-practicing Alevis, younger urban generations whose “Aleviness” rests primarily on their relationship to the *deyiş* tradition, as listeners and often non-professional performers. The aesthetic appreciation of the *deyiş*, even when the religious content of its words is foreign, creates a sense of identity that anchors the listeners’ and performers’ senses of self and their positions in society. In this regard, the *deyiş* create a sense of “Aleviness,” in relation not only to religious belief, but also to narratives of discrimination, exclusion, and persecution. In both practical and imaginal terms, the *deyiş* make community.

A similar argument is made by Janina Karolewski (2015, 107), who says “even young Alevis who do not attend Alevi rituals, who oppose religion, or who grew up without religious education within their families, recognize songs of the Alevi *âşık* tradition or, sometimes, even know them by heart.” Karolewski (2015) underlines that the musical and poetic tradition “serves as a cultural asset,” allowing Alevis to firmly negotiate their positions vis-à-vis society. Our earlier discussion of embodiment is a key to understanding this phenomenon. For this, we must reframe the term “embodiment” as “embodied knowledge,” i.e. knowledge that is intellectual, affective, and sensory. The earlier examples of the *miraçlama* and *mersiye* express precisely this type of traditional knowledge that is communally experienced and transmitted during performance. The affective and sensory dimensions of this embodied

⁶ According to official records, 111 people, the majority of whom were Alevis, lost their lives in the Maraş massacre that took place in the city of Kahramanmaraş between December 19–26, 1978 (Tunç 2011). In the Madımak massacre that occurred in the city of Sivas on July 2, 1993; thirty-three festival participants, two hotel staff and two massacre perpetrators lost their lives as a result of the burning of the Madımak Hotel. The majority of these were Alevi writers, poets, musicians, researchers, etc. who were staying at the hotel to attend a festival organized in the name of the Sivas-born folk poet Pir Sultan Abdal. This massacre was an important turning point in Alevi collective memory (Çavdar 2020).

knowledge are anchored in the music. Because of this, even in cases when the language (the vocabulary, terminology, metaphors, and historical references) is lost, by the preservation of the aesthetic dimension, something of the hermeneutic act is preserved as an embodied emotional content. This very phenomenon brings music to the center stage: a musical communion with tradition, by itself, provides access to a history that is both historical and mythical. The music carries the memory of the past even when all else is gone. It becomes the anchor of personal and group identity.

Authorship and oral transmission through the pen name (mahlas)

When Albert Lord and Milman Parry first formulated the role of orality in oral epics, they transformed our understanding of artistic creation in the oral realm (Lord 1960). The Alevi *deyiş* tradition reaffirms their fundamental dictum that each performance is an act of re-creation. This rests on a notion of authorship that is radically different from that of written traditions. The *deyiş* are re-created with each performance. Unlike the pre-modern scribes of manuscripts, who also had more agency than we imagine today, performers were and still are much more than transmitters. In transmitting tradition, they make tradition. Drawing on Richard Bauman's concept of performance (Bauman 1975, 293), Dorothy Noyes (2009, 248) defines tradition as the transfer "of responsibility to an audience for a display of communicative competence." If we adapt this definition to religious tradition, then the act of "communication" that requires competence becomes one in which sacrality, history, and art are transferred at the same time. This is the very responsibility of the singer-poet. Performers and listeners of the *deyiş* engage with tradition in a dynamic way. They carry it by remaking it.

The notion of authorship in the *deyiş* is best exemplified by the role of the pen name (mahlas). The mahlas is always mentioned in the last stanza of the poem. This is in common with Caucasian singer-poet traditions at large, as well as Islamicate poetry traditions. Many Alevi *deyiş* have been performed countless times over the centuries and transmitted both orally and in writing. The dynamism that this has caused can be traced in the transformation of pen names. As underlined before, it is not uncommon for one *deyiş* to have one mahlas in one region and another mahlas elsewhere. For poets such as Pir Sultan Abdal (flourished sixteenth century), who did not write their poems down, there is no way of tracing an "original," even when poems were recorded in various later manuscripts.

It was also not uncommon for the same poet to have more than one mahlas to use in poems with different content. A striking example is Ali Haki (1889–1961), an important poet of the Hakikatçı movement, who used a total of twelve pen names: Figani, Hicrani, Gedai, Gulami, Ali, Hoca, Hürü, Efdali, Harhari, Visali, Ednai, and Haki (Doğan 2020, 34–35). Poets could also adopt the poems of other poets with their own pen names. For instance, in the notebooks of Âşık Ali İzzet Özkan (1902–1981), a popular singer-poet of the twentieth century, folklorist İlhan Başgöz (1994, 52–57) came across poems that do not belong to Özkan but are written under his pen name. In addition, the *deyiş* written by male poets under the pen names of female poets are important examples of the relationship between gender roles and the Alevi *deyiş*. In two of his poems, Bektashi poet Edip Harabi (1853–1917) criticizes gender roles using the female pen names of Naciye and Zehra (Ceylan 2017). Two Hakikatçı poets, Meluli (1892–1989) and Ali Haki, also had poems under female pen names. While Meluli

wrote with the name of Latife belonging to his daughter (Özpolat and Erbil 2006, 273–289), Ali Haki used the name of his beloved, Hürri (Doğan 2020, 113).

These of course should not be seen as authorship in the modern sense, although contemporary copyright problems often rely on such a misunderstanding (Doğanay 2018). We must understand that our modern notions of originality and authenticity, which are themselves elaborate constructs, do not have a place here. The fact that the Alevi *deyiş* live as performance means that the pen name is constantly renewed and reconstructed by each performer. This opens the door to an endless intertextuality. It also reveals one function of the *mahlas*: the *mahlas* is where the act of transmission is coded as an act of responsibility. Speaking the name of a past singer-poet is a responsibility, precisely because of the definition of the *deyiş* as sacred speech. The act of transmission creates a sacred historical link with the person who is deemed as the original performer, the “archetype performer” so to speak. The performer and listener embody the sacredness of the *deyiş* because they embody the sacredness of the past singer-poet. The *mahlas* is thus the primary locus of embodiment. It is the dynamic link to a sacred past.

We suggest Deleuze and Guattari’s metaphor of the rhizome to understand how the Alevi *deyiş* are shaped and diversified. In contrast to a tree, the rhizome does not have a center. It is non-linear, non-hierarchical. The *deyiş* are connected in threads that go off in different directions, determined not by their distance from a center, but by their difference from one another. They “operate by variation, expansion, conquest, capture, offshoot” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 21). The perpetual circulation of the Alevi *deyiş* allows them to act in constant relationship with each other. For this reason, in each performance, sometimes a syllable, word or line of the *deyiş* that enters the world of intertextuality undergoes change or transformation, revealing the rhizomic mobility in the network of horizontal relations in the *deyiş* universe. The rhizomic transmission of poems and music replaces hierarchical vertical relations. The most important example of this is the variation in the *mahlas*.

For the traditional listener or performer, the *deyiş* does not lose its sacrality when it is attributed to somebody else. This is because, as the primary locus of embodiment, the *mahlas* is also a locus of intertextuality. In referring to past performers, whether imagined as original or not, the *mahlas* signifies community. The embodiment of the *mahlas* by each performer who re-creates the *deyiş* is also an act of community creation. The *mahlas* is sacred lineage in action.

Transmission in action: the case of Âşık Veysel

The sound recordings of Âşık Veysel (1894–1973), the best-known folk poet of the Republican era, provide an interesting example of the continuous vitality of the Alevi *deyiş* (Âşık Veysel 2017). They were apparently made in his own home some time before his death in 1973. In these recordings, Veysel plays and sings poems from the main sources of Alevi thought and poetry, such as Kaygusuz Abdal, Seyit Nesimi, Pir Sultan Abdal, and Teslim Abdal. This is interesting in that it does not fit the common narratives about Veysel’s life and art. Accordingly, in the early 1930s Veysel played and sang the *deyiş* of the master singer-poets before him on 78 revolutions per minute (rpm) records. In the following years, he performed entirely his own words and music. Yet the home recordings from Veysel’s final years show that Veysel

performed the Alevi *deyiş* with a vivid memory. Veysel, a blind poet, did not learn the *deyiş* he performed from a book or recording. So how did Veysel, who had been playing and singing his own works for many years, keep these classic Alevi *deyiş* in memory? Veysel himself tells us that he heard and learned these *deyiş* at various Alevi-Bektashi *cems* or *muhabbets* from other *âşiks* or master performers (Öz 2022, 87–91). He continued to perform them in various environments and keep this repertoire alive in his memory.

Veysel's case demonstrates that the Alevi *deyiş* live by oral transmission and form the repertoires of poets in a deeply intertextual environment. The *deyiş* are kept alive by individual and collective memory. Acquiring such a repertoire requires listening and internalizing for a long time. This highlights the relationship of the Alevi *deyiş* to memory in daily life, as well as the role of rituals in learning the Alevi *deyiş*. Maja Bjelica (2020, 377) discusses the practice of listening as a fundamental aspect of Alevi religious life, which is supported by the regular participation of Alevis in musical activities. In other words, the Alevi *deyiş* are performed not only in the ritual environment, but also in other social contexts, as in Veysel's audio recordings, where there are always listeners present. Evidently, Veysel was a strong singer-poet who composed his own works, as well as a good listener who had strong command of the Alevi *deyiş* repertoire. The communicative environment of Veysel brought together different aspects of the singer-poet as original creator, performer, and listener.

The entry of late fourteenth–early fifteenth-century poet Kaygusuz Abdal into the repertoire of *Âşık* Veysel indicates a very long line of transmission that we do not have access to. Yet this journey of the poetry of Kaygusuz Abdal creates an affinity between them. It indicates a repeating transfer of ritual knowledge, artistic knowledge, sacrality, and responsibility. Yet there is more to surprise us here. Veysel, who had largely excluded Alevi references from his own poems, masterfully performs a repertoire based on classical poems containing the founding elements of Alevi discourse. These audio recordings thus present us with a Veysel who is profoundly different from his public persona as a founding figure of Turkish national folk music and a fierce proponent of the Republican regime. It shows us that Veysel's status as a public figure and artist was dependent on the relegation of his "Aleviness" to the private realm. Yet Veysel's adherence to the national policy on Turkish identity, a policy that carried Sunni identity as its tacit element, was not strong enough to break his chain of transmission from the sacred Alevi past embodied in the *deyiş*.

From Ali Ufuki to the present: the journey of two *deyiş* attributed to Kaygusuz Abdal and Pir Sultan Abdal

Polish-born Ottoman palace musician and interpreter Ali Ufuki (Ufki)/Wojciech Bobowski (1610–1675) compiled two musical notation collections that are invaluable sources for the Ottoman-Turkish music tradition that was generally transmitted orally until the mid-nineteenth century (Haug 2020b, 157). In these *mecmua*, Ali Ufuki collected examples of a poetry/music culture that lived in the palace/urban environment of the period. One feature of the manuscripts of Ali Ufuki, who probably compiled works from the Bektashi Janissaries in and around the Ottoman palace, is that they present a wide repertoire of singer-poets, including Kaygusuz Abdal, Pir Sultan Abdal, Karacaoğlu, Kuloğlu, Kul Budala, and Katibi.

Past versions of the countless *deyiş/nefes* in the modern-day Alevi musical repertoire can shed light on how the Alevi *deyiş* have lived throughout the centuries (Özdemir 2018a, 176). Two *deyiş* in Ali Ufuki's *mecmua* exemplify what we have discussed so far. The first is the famous *şathiye* (humorous Sufi poem) attributed to Kaygusuz Abdal, which begins with the verse "*Bir kaz aldım ben karıdan*" (I bought a goose from a woman). The *şathiye* in Turkish are Sufi and Alevi poems that express esoteric truths with absurd imagery (Oktay-Uslu, 2019). The poem in question is not found in the oldest manuscripts of Kaygusuz Abdal's *Divan* (Oktay-Uslu, 2017). Yet it has come down to us as one of his most famous poems, probably due to its continuous oral recitation from at least the time of Ali Ufuki. The best-known modern rendition of the poem is found in Abdülbaki Gölpınarlı's *Kaygusuz Abdal, Hatayi, Kul Himmet* (Gölpınarlı 1953, 52–54).

A comparison of the two renditions is revealing. The two poems have very little in common, although they can still be considered the same poem. There is not one stanza that is identical. The final repeating line of each stanza in Gölpınarlı's rendition is not to be found in Ali Ufuki; the *mahlas* is not the same. What makes these the same poem is the central allegory of the goose that does not cook. The goose represents the *nefs* (the carnal self) that fails to be tamed no matter how much effort the spiritual wayfarer has put in. This unique and absurd allegory holds the poem together in the face of endless variation. We are giving the final stanza here for comparison:

*Budałamder muşkiul hatijm*⁷
Kaz kainatmak bukti belim
Olsun ia olmasun zulum
Ciak vlingesk kainadirez (Haug 2020a, 133)⁸

My *Budala*⁹ says I am in a terrible state
 Boiling this goose has broken my back
 Whether there be oppression or not
 We will keep boiling this goose as long as we are oppressed

Kaygusuz Abdal n'idelim
Ahd ile vefa güdelim
Kaldırıp postu gidelim
Kırk gün oldu kaynadırım kaynamaz (Gölpınarlı 1953, 54)

O Kaygusuz Abdal, what can we do
 Let us be faithful to our pact
 Let us pick up our animal hide and go¹⁰
 I have been boiling it for forty days; and it still doesn't boil . . .

⁷ These verses quoted by Judith Haug were written according to Ali Ufuki's own transliteration system (Haug 2020a, 3).

⁸ "Ciak vlingesk" is probably "çok oluncak," although the transliteration is closer to "çok ölünce." We are translating accordingly to make sense of the poem.

⁹ *Budala* is the plural for *abdal*.

¹⁰ The dervishes wore animal hides. The term also denotes one's status as sheikh in Sufism and as saint in Alevism. There are twelve *posts* in the Alevi *meydan* (the place where the cem is held). One of these belongs to Kaygusuz Abdal.

In the Gölpınarlı edition, Kaygusuz Abdal is telling himself to let go of his position as master, or to pick up his stuff and keep traveling as a wandering dervish, because he failed to tame his base self. In Ali Ufuki's mecmua, a reference to *zulüm* (cruelty, oppression) is introduced. In the literal sense, the *zulüm* here is the agony of continuously trying to boil the goose and failing at it. While this could be taken to mean one's own cruelty towards their base self, it is also possible for it to refer to political oppression. If the latter is true, then we are face to face with a political discourse that is not found in Kaygusuz Abdal's *Divan*, but that is nonetheless integral to later Alevi poetry. This would then be a Kaygusuz who has been adapted or re-created to fit the political environment of the seventeenth century. While the discourse on taming the base self is of Sufi origin, the reference to oppression is properly Alevi. Both discourses have remained alive until our day.

A second example from Ali Ufuki's mecmua is a poem attributed to Pir Sultan Abdal that has the repeating rhyme of *-a muhtaç eylemiş* (has rendered beholden to). The same *deyiş* can be found in a modern collection of *deyiş* attributed to Shah Hatayi (also known as Shah İsmail), as well as a recent collection of *deyiş* sung by Mamo Geyik Dede (2022) (also known as Mamî Algudanê in Kurdish, 1935–2012), where the poem is attributed to seventeenth-century poet Virani. We thus have a case in which the same poem is performed and collected with three different pen names. A comparison of the three poems shows that due to the rhyme that repeats at the end of each stanza, the final lines of each stanza remain identical in all versions. Variation occurs in the lines that follow the internal rhyme of the stanza. The final stanzas of each version exemplify this:

Kimin karanlukda kimin de gün ay
Pir Sultân ‘Abdalım qalalım her ay
Kimisiniñ biri tahtıyla sarây
Kimini külhâna muhtâc eylemiş (Haug 2020a, 145)¹¹

Some are in the dark, some face the sun and the moon
My Pir Sultan Abdal, may we stay every month (?)
 Some have their place at the throne and palace
 And some are rendered beholden to the furnace

Şah Hatayi’ım der ki yokuşluk payı
Kimine gün doğdurur kimine ayı
Kimine köşk yapmış tahtı sarayı
Kimini külhana muhtâc eylemiş (Arslanoğlu 1992, 493)

My Shah Hatayi says this is the lot of hardship
 The sun rises for some, for others it is the moon
 Some are given mansions, thrones and palaces
 And some are rendered beholden to the furnace

¹¹ We follow Haug's transliteration. The problems with meaning in this stanza (as well as those in Kaygusuz Abdal's poem) demonstrate that important parts of the meaning were lost during initial collection in Ali Ufuki's mecmua. The word "*biri*" (one of them) should probably be "*yiri*" (place). We are translating accordingly.

*Ey Virani kimi yoksul kimi bay
 Kimine güneş doğdurmuş kimine ayı
 Kimine yaptırmış tahtı sarayı
 Kimini külhana muhtaç eylemiş* (Mamo Geyik Dede 2022)

O **Virani**, some are rich and some are poor
 For some he had the sun rise, for some he gave the moon
 For some he had thrones and palaces built
 And some are rendered beholden to the furnace

These examples show the dynamism and variation that come with oral transmission. Especially for the first poem attributed to Kaygusuz Abdal, but possibly for both, we could ask whether these should be considered the same poem, or whether the one in Ali Ufuki's mecmua is a *nazire* (parallel poem). This possibility is also underlined by Haug (2020b, 166). This is a methodological impasse, because our modern and literate understanding of difference would not fit the emic perspectives of the poems' audience. In the second example from Ali Ufuki, the versions of the poem speak to each other around the central theme of one's God-given lot, in addition to similarities in rhyme and vocabulary. This creates an additional level of intertextuality, that extends beyond different poems to different versions of the same poem. Such changes in the wording and music of the poems due to oral transmission were an important marker of the *deyiş* tradition.

The modern interpretations of Kaygusuz Abdal

From a musical perspective, it is very difficult to find data regarding the change in the historical musical performance of the poem attributed to Kaygusuz Abdal. There is not enough information for this in Ali Ufuki. However, four different interpretations of the poem edited by Gölpinarlı were recorded in 1976, 1996, 2014, and 2017. These provide rich enough data to ask questions about how the Alevi *deyiş* circulates through the popular music industry and what role it plays in the formation of different musical identities.

Esin Afşar, who was part of the Anatolian pop movement that started in the 1960s and included arrangements of folk songs in Western music forms, published the poem attributed to Kaygusuz Abdal with the music of Engin Atamer under the name "Kaz" (Goose) in 45 rpm format in 1976 (Afşar 1976). Afşar, who sang many Alevi *deyiş* throughout her career, although she is not an Alevi herself, performed the song in the form of Western folk music with guitar, percussion, and male backing vocals in this recording, and in some parts sang it recitatively in an epic and narrative style.

Aşık İsmail İpek, who became known with the 45 rpm records that he made since the late 1960s, performed the poem attributed to Kaygusuz Abdal under the name "Kaz Kaynamaz" (The Goose Doesn't Boil) on the album "Muradın Almayan Kullar" (Servants of God who do not receive their divine wish), published in 1996 (İpek 1996). İpek, an Alevi singer-poet, played and sang *bağlama* throughout his career and performed the *deyiş* of some master Alevi singer-poets in addition to his own *deyiş*. In this recording, İpek went a little further from his own playing and singing style and

performed with a musical expression that is more similar to the style of Eastern Anatolian minstrels, in which non-metric and metric forms are interlocked. In this performance, a character narrating the poem is occasionally heard.

Hüseyin Turan, one of the popular musicians of Alevi origin, became known for the popular folk music albums he published since the end of the 1990s. Turan composed and published music for the same poem under the name “Kaynamaz” (Does not boil) on his album “Süveyda,”¹² published in 2014 (Turan 2014). In the recording performed by Turan with a playful attitude, instruments such as electric bağlama and electric guitar, as well as sounds like sitar and tabla reminiscent of Indian music, can be heard. In this recording, the content of the poem is transformed into a cheerful story.

Hüsnü Arkan, who sang our last example, is known for the compositions he sang in his solo albums since the 1990s and in Ezginin Günlüğü, one of the popular protest music groups in which he worked as a soloist for a while. Arkan, who is not of Alevi origin, composed and published the same poem under the name “Kaygusuz Abdal” in his album “Yalnız Değiliz” (We Are Not Alone), published in 2013 (Arkan 2013). The recording, in which partial bağlama tones are heard, is like a combination of the four songs we gave as examples above. Clarinet, guitar, percussion, and backing vocals remind us of Esin Afşar’s folk music sound, but at the same time, the joyful mood of Hüseyin Turan’s interpretation is heard here too.

Kaygusuz Abdal’s pen name was used in all four recordings. In all of these recordings, there is a tendency to perform the content of the poem with a descriptive musical expression. In general, a pleasant mood was preferred in all four of them. This leads us to an important question regarding the musical diversity of the Alevi deyiş. Putting aside the Alevi or non-Alevi origins of their performers, is it possible to call all of these recordings Alevi deyiş, even when their musicalities differ significantly from historical precedents? In our opinion, all of these records are Alevi deyiş, precisely because they carry the diversity and dynamism of the Alevi deyiş tradition as a constitutive element. These performances, which reveal the desire to be progressive and reach a wide audience, reflect a contemporary engagement and devotion to the Alevi belief system that is mediated by the deyiş of singer-poets such as Pir Sultan Abdal or Kaygusuz Abdal (Koerbin 2011, 208).

The intensive circulation and transmission of the Alevi deyiş through all kinds of media, from ritual to daily life, among Alevis and outside, leads to their constant diversification. This opens up an expanding universe of intertextuality, which renders it futile to seek the original or authentic version of an Alevi deyiş. Clearly, modern and contemporary performances of Alevi music do not carry historical nostalgia towards musical sound, that is, there is no attempt to re-create any deyiş, for example, with the sound of the sixteenth century (Koerbin 2011, 208). This reinforces our earlier claim that the deyiş as an entity is held together by the words of the poem, and when these themselves diversify, it is held together by certain elements of the poem that denote continuity, such as metaphor or rhyme. The Alevi deyiş thus continue to exist in an endless state of becoming.

¹² A term of Sufi origin, *süveyda* denotes the black dot believed to be at the center of the heart, which is the locus of divine manifestation.

Conclusion

The *deyiş* present us with a rare case of a literary genre and corpus that has been alive since at least the sixteenth century. The *deyiş* get written down in various formats; recordings are made, and yet the oral dimension of transmission never loses center stage. These other forms of transmission can only accompany the orality that is the primary dynamic of the *deyiş*, precisely due to its continuous use in ritual and other contexts. In this regard, the *deyiş* are a locus of continuity from the past to the present, from the premodern to the modern, from the rural to the urban, from the local to the global. In the current Alevi milieu, discussions of change often lead to heated debates. Urbanization, migration, and the emergence of a large diaspora are processes that necessitate constant adaptation and negotiation. The possibility of self-preservation in the face of change is not evident for the Alevi community. Yet the *deyiş* tell a different story. They offer an alternative to narratives that posit modernization as a radical break from the past.

As we end our discussion, it is worth taking up our opening line by Glassie (1995, 395): “Accept, to begin, that tradition is the creation of the future out of the past.” In investigating the *deyiş* as tradition, we see the dynamism and openness to change that this definition entails. Such a concept and practice of tradition is in stark contrast to ossified and reified emic concepts of tradition found in Sunnism or other religious orthodoxies. The crucial role of the rhizomatic character of the Alevi *deyiş* is better grasped in comparison to the hierarchical and highly textual canon/corpus that is associated with institutionalized orthodox traditions. Both embodied and horizontal in its evolution, the *deyiş* endow the Alevi tradition with a dynamism in time and history that is lacking from the laborious text-centered hermeneutical recovery project of modern Sunni traditionalism.

The Alevi literary and musical tradition hence carries and re-creates the past. This includes both sacred and political history, but it is also a transfer of authority, responsibility, and sacrality itself. This act of remaking the past and carrying it to the future is the dynamic that allows the *deyiş* to anchor Alevi identity, in the plurality of ways that this is defined. Even in non-religious contexts, this identity is imbued with some sacredness. This is the unique role of poetry and music: the *deyiş* present an embodied experience of ritual knowledge. Even when the line of transmission for a hermeneutical understanding of the poems’ words is broken, precisely through affect, a ritual experience is nonetheless possible. The *deyiş* as ritual thus rely on the affective dimensions of poetry and music as a form of embodiment, as a type of knowledge that does not prioritize one’s rational faculty.

The words of the Alevi *deyiş* determine the structural features of their music. The dynamism and constant dialogue of both give the *deyiş* their unique character. The *deyiş* are reshaped with every musical transmission, while also reshaping the identities of their performers and listeners. Singing or listening to the *deyiş* is thus an act of becoming, whether becoming a soul (can) during ritual, or becoming Alevi in the face of social oppression. Agency is created in the form of affect.

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