

Chapter 28. An Alevi Concert Event in Paris: Doğa Aşkına – Terre, Mon Amour

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Introduction

Rather than a legal recognition as religion, Alevism in France has been pursuing a public type of commitment that is different from the past and from elsewhere. The Franco-Alevi novelty presented here reveals important peculiarities that differ from common academic representations of Alevism in Turkey as well as in European articulations. Such a peculiarity relies mostly in an endorsed public collaboration of the federation of French Alevi associations (FUAF) with ecologist organizations operating in France as well as in Turkey. Such collaboration was achieved thanks to the adoption of an environmental discourse overshadowing canonical framings of Alevism as an oppositional and secretive religious movement. Focusing on a specific event as an ethnographic case study, in this paper I wish to highlight the ‘permeable’ character of Alevism in this recent French articulation. The public collaboration of the Alevis in France with ecologist associations and their embracing of an environmental discourse resonate with Ruth Mandel’s expectations over contemporary and cosmopolitan Alevi experiences.

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. (Mandel, 2008, p. 293)

The case study discussed here offers partial findings in order to raise critical questions on transnational representations of Alevism. This case study constitutes a small piece in the wider scope of the PhD project that I am currently conducting in the frame of the AHRC funded South West and Wales Doctoral Training Partnership enabling a joint supervision between the Drama department at the

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Acknowledgments: An earlier version of this paper was presented and discussed in June 2015 at the joint CORD/SDHS conference ‘Cut & Paste: Dance Advocacy in the Age of Austerity’ in Athens, Greece, as well as in the frame of the course ‘Cultural Adaptation’ at the Drama Department in Exeter last Autumn. My discussion benefits from insights gained by meeting with several people in France as well as in Turkey. Especially I am indebted to the kind help of Doğa Aşkına’s artistic director Mazlum Çimen, Doğa Derneği’s general director Güven Eken and FUAF Youth Group President and semah teacher Sibel Güneş. I wish to thank my supervisor Jerri Daboo and co-supervisor John Morgan O’Connell for their constant encouragement, patient support, and precious feedback. I am also grateful to Jane Milling and Bryan Brown who read and gave me important comments on an earlier and extended version of this text. I appreciated the precious input received from the conference organizers and reviewers, co-presenters and attendees of the panel into which this paper was inserted. Finally I wish to thank Nicky Meyer and Joe Meyer who helped me with improving this paper’s English.

University of Exeter and the School of Music at Cardiff University. The wider purpose of my PhD project is to investigate the Alevi semah by tackling its kinetic elements as a core element of ritual practices and beliefs, as well as to explore staged adaptations of this form in novel artistic and transnational contexts. My project is thus really much aiming at manufacturing an anthropological investigation of the semah-s as movement practices that are recognized as a crucial emblem by the Alevis.

Movement

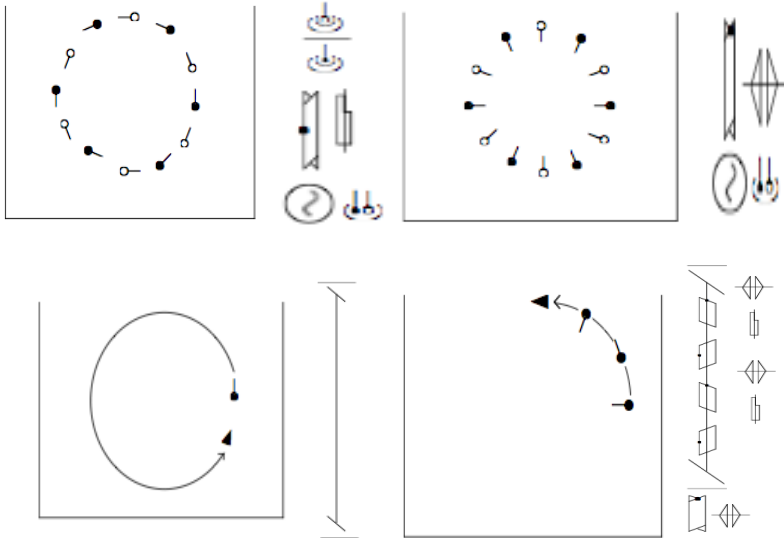
My interest in semah movements dates back to 2009 when I had the opportunity to participate in rehearsals of the amateur theatre company Ankara Deneme Sahnesi based in Ankara. This experience motivated me to explore how, starting in the 1980s this group, composed of Alevi and non-Alevi alike, experienced and reconfigured some Alevi semah-s in the frame of a theatre performance titled 'Samah- Kardeşlik Töreni'. Reflecting on my experience with Turner's performative approach (1982), I investigated this theatre piece also with the purpose of understanding how Alevism is publicly performed in contemporary Turkey. Finally, since 2013, I started to explore Alevi performing culture in the diaspora, and especially in France and in England.

Even if briefly, before entering into the details of the Franco-Alevi concert event that I discuss here, it is worth spending some time to clarify my use of the term 'movement'. Such a clarification seems necessary as long as my use of the term may differ from the way most of presenters in this conference would normally use it. Crucially, before asking myself questions related to human movement as 'social phenomenon', 'common ideology' or 'resettlement', I begin by looking at movement as human bodily motion, kinetics and choreography. In this sense, more than as migration, the category of 'movement' should be interpreted as a general container for bodily social interactions, which get formally stylized in activities such as dance, sport and play. The choice of speaking of the semah in terms of movement and not in terms of dance is here not accidental and relies on Adrienne Kaeppeler's theoretical notion (1985) of 'structured movement system'. The concept is used as a more neutral category to discuss cross-culturally bodily patterns that are normally labelled as 'dances' in Western context. The recourse to the term 'movement' testifies the difficulty in producing a categorization of the semah that may be satisfactory for the external analyst as well as for the Alevi devout, thus enabling to appreciate the political weight of this embodied tradition. Accordingly, I avoided calling the semah 'dance' because of the contentious status with which this practice is addressed and experienced. Many Alevis would indeed reject this characterization as long as 'dance' normally alludes to a merely mundane or professional activity and, especially in Turkish context, the term 'dans' has a specific connotation associated to staged and Western artistic productions (*Öztürkmen 2001*). In Alevi emic perspectives the prominence of the semah commands it to be qualified as 'ibadet' (devotion), 'aşk hali' (love state) or 'meditasyon' (meditation). Additionally, it is sometimes claimed that the semah should be placed next to other worshipful movements in Christian ceremonies or namaz in Islam (*Bahar 2012, 183*). Speaking of the semah as movement rather than

dance is more accurate also when we take into consideration the linguistic reference that is used in Turkish to denote the action of moving in this context; indeed, the verb that typically accompanies the word semah is *dönmek* 'to turn'. It is therefore accurate to translate with 'turning a semah', rather than 'dancing it'.

As a 'structured movement system' my analysis is largely based on the observation, participation and notation of the semahs. The use of strategies borrowed from Laban notation systems enables me to focus especially on changes in the postures and gestures, qualities of the movement and group spatial configurations (i.e. see Figure 1). Referring to categories established by scholars as Nahachewsky (1995) for the analysis of dance events, I distinguish between a 'participatory' and 'presentational' character to sort out enactments of the semahs as part of the ayin-i cem rituals, in the frame of festivals which are important gatherings for the Alevi, or arrangements when the semah is used to present Alevism to people who may not be familiar with this spiritual path. I am looking at these in a Turkish context as well as among Alevi communities abroad, also with the purpose of elucidating transnational interactions, migrations and adaptations. By focusing on such changes I hope to be able to contribute to a novel understanding of Alevism as a cosmopolitan belief system and aesthetic culture.

Figure 1. Some recurring basic group patterns and spacial configurations.



Source: Notated material.

Doğa Aşkına

Doğa Aşkına – Terre, Mon Amour, is a concert event organized on the 7th of June 2014 at the Palais des Congrès de Paris. The FUAF (*Federation Union des Alevi en France*, Union Federation of the Alevi in France) designed it as a celebration for the 15th anniversary since its establishment and titled it *Doğa Aşkına*

(litt. ‘to the love of nature’) in Turkish, and *Terre, Mon Amour* (‘earth, my love’) in French. The celebration was organized for World Environment Day in a collaboration with two of the major non-governmental ecologist organizations operating in Turkey and in France, namely Doğa Derneği and the Fondation Nicolas Hulot.

Preceding Doğa Aşkına was an event organized on the 14th of June 2008 for the 10th anniversary of FUAF and held at the Zenith concert hall in Strasbourg, the city where the association had its headquarters until January 2016. That celebratory event, titled *Amour, Je Danse Ton Nom*, gathered more than 10,000 Alevis from all over Europe. The entrance fee for *Amour, Je Danse Ton Nom* was 10 euros, but entrance to *Doğa Aşkına - Terre, Mon Amour* got much more expensive, with tickets ranging from 30 to 50 euros. The organizers challenged their own potential by choosing an imposing location, as the Palais des Congrès constitutes the largest concert venue in France with a capacity of 3700 spectators.

This discussion is based on my participation as a concert attendee, on the analysis of the material distributed during it and of promotional material retrieved online.

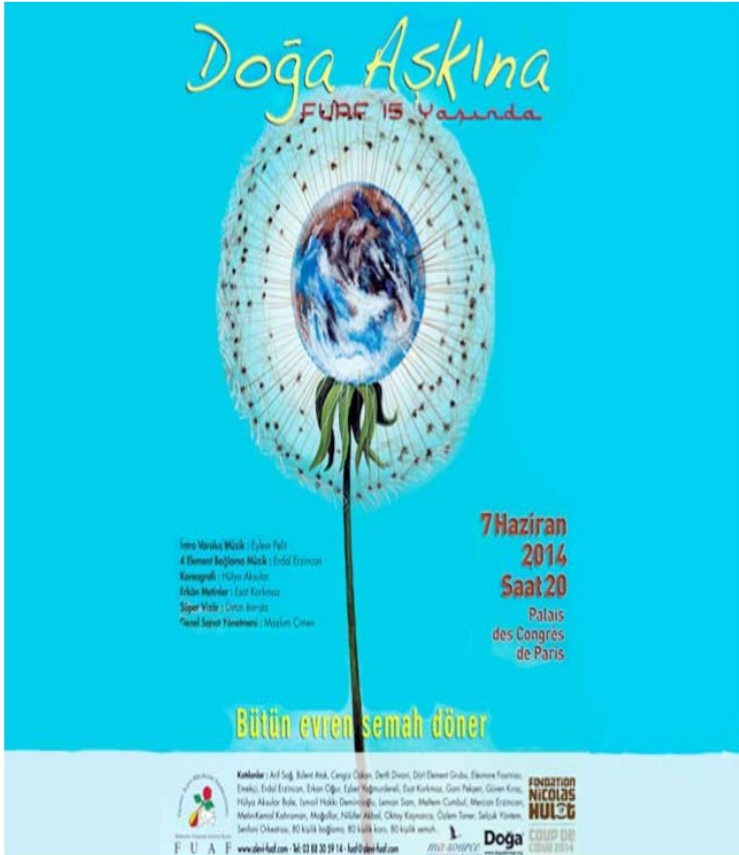
The event’s eye-catching poster (Figure 2) displays an image of the earth as the head of a dandelion enclosed in its fluffy seed balls, some of which already broke away from the flower and now float in a bright blue sky. Representing the world as a wildflower, this poster suggests important issues of ecology and sustainability. The dandelion is used here as an ‘objective correlative’ capable of pointing to the coexisting qualities of the fragility and strength of the planet. The image may also hint at the scattering of the Alevis as seeds leaving their motherland. Similarly, to its title, the entire event is promoted and presented in Turkish as well as in French, with headings being adjusted to the cultural world of the two languages. Accordingly, underneath the poster’s earth-flower image a sentence reads in French *La nature est la plus belle œuvre à préserver* (‘Nature is the most beautiful masterpiece to preserve’) and in Turkish *Bütün evren semah döner* (All the universe turns the semah), the latter being a quote from a poem by the folk cantor Aşık Hüdai, a well known figure among the Alevis.

The concert gathers many of the most celebrated musicians from Turkey, such as the bağlama virtuoso Arif Sağ, the rock-band Moğollar, the internationally acclaimed Erkan Oğur and the Dede and UNESCO–recognized living human treasure Dertli Divani, all joining in on their own volition. Together with them the artistic director Mazlum Çimen brings on the stage a symphonic orchestra accompanied by a group of eighty chorus singers and eighty bağlama players directed by the composer Erdal Erzincan. A group of eighty people is also invited onto the stage to whirl the most crowded semah that I ever experienced. This semah is followed by a modern dance piece choreographed by Hülya Aksular, founder of one of the most recognised ballet schools in Istanbul, who offers an adaptation of some semah patterns in a dance-theatre style.

Throughout the passage on the stage of the various artists, some texts written by the Alevi intellectual and dede Esat Korkmaz are projected as holograms and on the large bright screens. These texts, which are also published in a brochure distributed to the audience, consist of a hymn dedicated to ‘Nature’ and to its four elements:

earth, fire, water and air. The hymns are written not only in French and Turkish, but also in Kurmanji and Zaza.

Figure 2. Poster of Doğa Aşkına.



Source: <http://www.aleviyiz.org/fransa-alevi-federasyonundan-doga-askina-semah.html> retrieved on the 12nd of August 2016.

On the stage, as well as on the brochure, a FUAF manifesto is enfolded. Some of those who are familiar with recent Alevi history would be reminded of an earlier Alevi manifesto produced in 1989 by another European association, the Hamburg Alevi Association. That document, written by Alevi and Sunni intellectuals alike, and published one year later in *Cumhuriyet*, the main left-wing newspaper at the time in Turkey, marked a very important step towards the public recognition of Alevism as a self-contained faith and culture. That document emphasized Alevism as grounded in Islam and demanded equal representation and opportunities in education, media visibility and money allocation for the implementation of religious services (*Özyürek, 2009, p.128*). On the contrary, the manifesto presented here re-

interprets Alevism more in terms of a humanist and ecologist worldview. The tenets of the Alevi doctrines are thus summed up by stressing the need of humankind to honour 'Nature as God' and to search within oneself for those resources that may help resist the shadows of individualism and barbarism affecting the modern world. In an emphasis on self-knowledge and immanence, the text proclaims a refusal of dogmas and sacred texts in favour of an invitation to worship God by finding him 'on the traits on the human face, in the sound of the strings of the bağlama or on the slopes of the mountains'². Hence, FUAF claims the urge to rethink all mystical knowledge at the service of the oppressed. Additionally, it establishes an affinity of the Alevi to religious groups who suffered from sectarian persecutions in Europe during the Middle Ages, like the Cathars and the Bogomils. Finally, by referring to key figures of the Alevi tradition, such as the saint Hacı Bektaş Veli, the text proclaims the refusal of any sort of gender discrimination and invites us to look at men and women as equal: "whatever observed default is but relative (difference exists only when you want to look at it)"³.

The promotional material that accompanied the event on social medias⁴ begins with a woman turning a semah by spinning on her vertical axis. This is followed by extracts from the passage of the various musicians on the stage and finally by symbolic monuments of Paris, such as a glittering Tour Eiffel and the Pyramid at the Louvre Museums. A male voice comments: *Doğa Aşkına Enel Hak demektir, Sevgidir, Gezi'dir* (*Doğa Aşkına* means 'Enel Hak', means Love, means Gezi). All these elements contribute in framing the event as a site for the conflation of various interests and attitudes. The hundreds of Alevi spectators coming from all over France and from abroad find indeed at the Palais des Congrès an occasion to celebrate their own ancestral identity and political positioning. They display these belongings in an international arena, as underpinned by the emphasis on the Parisian monuments. In this way *Doğa Aşkına* contributes to the emerging international visibility of Alevism, which becomes here a public fact that is not only restricted to a religious and spiritual tradition, but incorporating also an all-embracing spectacle made of music, dance, theatre and holographic display. A great deal of emotional excitement among the audiences is caused by the insertion in the slogan of a famous statement by the religious figure Hallaj-ı Mansur. His famous words *Enel Hak* ('I am the Truth') are recalled among the Alevi as the saint's self-proclamation of being in total communion with God. Like many other Sufi saints and martyrs, the Alevi recognize Hallaj-ı Mansur, who was eventually hanged on the public square by the Abbasid Caliph Al-Muqtaqir, as a key guide. In this clip its rebellious and spiritual statement is juxtaposed to the occurrences commenced in June 2013 in Gezi Park at the vibrant centre of Istanbul. *Doğa Aşkına* constitutes indeed a space to condemn and reflect upon the current political situations in Turkey, as well as to bridge that experience to the life of the Turkish community in France.

² My translation from French and Turkish.

³ My translation from French and Turkish.

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aWPMalEkcxE> and

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dsQxY8xaS3c>, retrieved on the 30th of August 2015.

Towards the end of the evening, on the stage of the Palais des Congrès the presenters invite the participants to observe a minute of silence in commemoration of the episodes of violence in which the Alevis lost their life, starting with a long and soaring salute given to those who were killed at the Madımak Hotel in Sivas on the 2nd of July 1993. The salute is thus addressed also to the eleven victims who died during the protests which started one year earlier in Istanbul's Gezi Park, all of whom had an Alevi background. They condemn the state violence, spreading from Gezi all over the country. The commemoration is then extended to the 331 workers who lost their lives just some weeks earlier to the event during a disaster in a coalmine in the town of Soma in the district of Manisa in Western Turkey.

The strong relation of *Doğa Aşkına* with the Gezi movement requires that we examine the way the Alevis participated in those protests. The event in Paris is indeed specifically organized by and addressed to an Alevi audience in contrast to the character of the Gezi protests. Ayfer Karakaya-Stump remarks how the AKP government and its media networks quickly started to 'alevitize' these uprisings by attempting to represent them specifically as an Alevi revolt. These claims neglected the pluralist and radical potential of the demonstrations, developing spontaneously as a revolt against the paternalistic mentality of the state and assembling groups belonging to diverse socio-cultural backgrounds: environmentalists fighting against the government's neoliberal policies based on speculative investment, secularists unhappy with islamist repressive measures, LGBT citizens, and ethno-religious minorities. Many Alevis participated next to other anti-capitalist Muslims, socialists, liberals, Kurds, Armenians, educated middle-class members and blue-collar workers (*Karakaya-Stump, 2013, p.3*). Nonetheless, the security forces were quick in asserting that 78 per cent of those arrested during the protests were Alevis, a controversial finding when we consider that the Turkish census does not recognize 'Alevi' as a social marker, nor is it possible to be identified as such on the Turkish ID. Karakaya-Stump calls this 'Erdoğan's systemic ethnicization of dissent', a strategy that perpetrates the same irresponsible sectarian politics of the right-wing predecessors of the AKP.

It is useful to understand *Doğa Aşkına* and the Gezi Park protests together, but also to acknowledge that these constitute two profoundly different social events. Whereas the Gezi protests were not an event specifically designed by an Alevi politically organized collective with a precise Alevi agenda in mind, the concert at the Palais des Congrès was directly organized by the main Alevi association in France as an occurrence to publicly display and celebrate Aleviness. Nevertheless, it also entangled an opportunity to commemorate the victims of political violence and poor labour conditions in Turkey. Whereas the Gezi events have been a pluralist protest in which all of those who died were Alevis, *Doğa Aşkına* was organized by Alevi network and conceived for an Alevi audience.

Environmental Friendly Franco-Alevism

Beyond the only celebration of Aleviness, by emphasizing an ecologist discourse, *Doğa Aşkına* embraced components that colour the event with civic tones than are not only religious and not only political. Such a strategy proved to be successful in coping with the challenging social status of the Alevis as a non-Sunni

and non-Christian minority group, while at the same time resisting official clear-cut categorizations. Political historian Sanim Akgönül offers one of the few descriptions of the French Alevi community:

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, p.154)

The new environmental-friendly discourse adopted in *Doğa Aşkına* reframes Alevism out of the habitual anti-Sunni rhetoric adopted in the past. Akgönül explains that Alevi associations in France had been attempting to prove that Alevism epitomized “Turkishness” and Turkish Islam as entirely different from the Islam of North Africa. However, *Doğa Aşkına* reframes Alevism into a novel picture. By articulating the celebration of Aleviness through semah and music, commemorating the martyrs of the Gezi protests with other victims of sectarian violence and poor labour conditions in Turkey, and finally embracing an ecological discourse, Alevism displays here a deeper cultural richness and civic type of commitment. In organizing *Doğa Aşkına*, FUAFA honoured ‘Nature’ through the lenses of Alevi culture and belief. In a sophisticated spectacle, Alevism emerges here as a public entity that not only sets its own spiritual tradition into global current environmental discourses, but also as a movement that embraces and claims the remembrance of Gnostic and Manichaeist Christian religious groups that were massacred and extinguished in Europe over the Middle Ages.

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