

Aesthetic and Performative Dimensions of Alevi Cultural Heritage

Edited by **Martin Greve**
Ulaş Özdemir
Raoul Motika



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of Alevi Cultural Heritage

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Contents

<i>Martin Greve, Ulaş Özdemir, Raoul Motika</i> Introduction	7
I. Ritual, Body and Aesthetic	
<i>Robert Langer</i> The Aesthetics of Contemporary Alevi Religious Practice: A Bodily-and-Material Cultures' Approach	11
<i>Nicolas Elias</i> The Drinking Dervishes. An Enquiry into Ritual Inebriation in a Bektashi Congregation	33
<i>Sinibaldo De Rosa</i> Movement and Adaptation of the Alevi <i>Semah</i> for the Stage: From <i>Kardeşlik Töreni-Samah</i> to 'Biz'	45
II. Ritual and Musical Performance	
<i>Jérôme Cler</i> The Life of a Ritual Repertoire and its Aesthetic: <i>Cem</i> Ceremonies in Tekke Köyü, the Village of Abdal Musa	65
<i>Martin Greve</i> Miracles and Tears. Religious Music in Dersim/Tunceli	103
<i>Ulaş Özdemir</i> With or Without <i>Bağlama</i> ? A Religious Aesthetic Debate on 'Music' Performance in Funerals	133
III. Written Sources of Alevi Cultural Heritage	
<i>Judith I. Haug</i> 'Ali Ufukî's Notation Collections as Sources for 'Aşık Culture and Literature	159
<i>Janina Karolewski</i> The Materiality of Alevi Written Heritage: Beautiful Objects, Valuable Manuscripts, and Ordinary Books	175
Contributors	213

Introduction

Martin Greve, Ulaş Özdemir & Raoul Motika

Alevi, Bektaşî, Kızılbaş, Tahtacı and similar communities, mainly originating from Anatolia though by transnational migration processes now scattered almost all over the world, are commonly referred to nowadays as ‘Alevi.’ The tendency to unify these groups has various explanations and even political functions. However, even a quick glance at historical sources and contemporary religious practices proves that these communities have neither been homogeneous throughout history nor become so in the contemporary context. This plurality throughout the history is, besides the scarcity of written sources for many periods and places, the most important challenge for those dealing with ‘Alevi’ today. Even in this volume, diverse and complex aspects and phenomena are presented and subsumed under the single term ‘Alevi.’ This reflects our belief that the question of how ‘Alevism’ is imagined, believed and practised is more important than the discussion of the specific boundaries and definition of ‘Alevi’ today. In other words, we search for answers to questions of how ‘Alevism’ is lived and how the cultural knowledge of those who regard themselves as ‘Alevi’ comes to constitute the cultural concepts related to ‘Alevism.’ The aesthetic and performative diversity of Alevi and Alevism’s cultural past and present shows a wide spectrum of possible answers.

Within the plurality and diversity of Alevism another question also arises, of what we should understand as its aesthetics and performance. Instead of using theories of ‘aesthetics’ or ‘performativity’ as a starting point, we prefer to discuss the perception of aesthetics and performance based on Alevi practices, as much more research and scholarly discussion is needed before specific theoretical approaches can be developed.

As a primary step, it seems necessary to examine which cultural phenomena are appropriated by Alevi, to analyse how they internalise, (re-)shape and perform them. For this research, neither the paradigm of traditional-modern is of any help, nor the search for an ‘essence of Alevism’ or any kind of ‘real Alevi.’ Rather, we hope to widen the scope of Alevism studies by examining their concrete aesthetic and performative dimensions, both historically and in contemporary practice. What is considered in this book as ‘Alevi cultural heritage’ therefore includes everything that Alevi themselves perceive as inherited parts of their culture or religion.

Within this context, analysing and conceptualising aesthetic dimensions of Alevi cultural heritage presents almost unsurmountable difficulties, and at present it seems largely unclear how the specific affinity of Alevism to ‘artistic’ expression can be theorized. This volume does not therefore aim to advance an aesthetic

theory for Alevi cultural heritage. The main aim is rather to examine phenomena which Alevis accept as their cultural heritage and which are diversified aesthetically and performatively. Neither does it follow an approach based on a specific aesthetic theory; rather each article discusses aesthetic and performative dimensions according to its own specific context. On the other hand, the concept of 'performance' as used in the title of this book focuses on how Alevis perform any form of piety or spirituality in their communal life.

The present book originates in a lecture series, 'Aesthetic Dimensions of Alevi Cultural Heritage,' held winter 2017–2018 at the Orient-Institute Istanbul. While a wide range of artistic genres in the context of Alevism were discussed in this lecture series, including music, poetry, architecture, iconography and body movement, the editors later decided to focus this volume on performative aspects of Alevi cultural heritage (ritual, sound, body movements), rather than on its material culture (architecture, ritual objects etc.). Only the last part of this volume focuses on manuscripts, in the case of Judith Haug's text on written sources of performed music; while Janina Karolewski's article analyses them as a specific form of cultural expression in material form embedded in social life, rather than focusing on the written content.

In this book, we have examined the aesthetic and performative dimensions of Alevi cultural heritage from past to present, in an interdisciplinary framework and using a wide range of approaches. The chapters analyse traditional, contemporary and transnational developments of Alevi cultural expression including modern adaptations (De Rosa), local (Elias, Cler) and regional practices (Greve), Alevism in a wider context (Langer, Özdemir), textual sources (Haug) and materiality (Karolewski). The perspectives of the various authors, each coming from different disciplines, demonstrate the complexity of socio-historical and socio-cultural dynamics. To conclude, the present volume is intended as a first approach to a complex issue, which definitely deserves further research and analysis.

Jérôme Cler's article was translated from French by Maude Caillat, and Ulaş Özdemir's article from Turkish by Öznur Karakaş. The editors would like to express their gratitude to Sarah Mandel for the careful editing of the whole volume, and the Orient-Institute Istanbul for its support.

I.
Ritual, Body and Aesthetic

The Aesthetics of Contemporary Alevi Religious Practice: A Bodily-and-Material Cultures' Approach

Robert Langer

Introduction

Alevi ritual practice is a significant means in the (re)production of a specific Alevi cultural identity and habitus, i.e. the way to use the body and perceive with it, established by socialisation, and cultural identity. It is by now an established fact in academic discourse that the *cem* ritual (Motika, Langer, 2005) and the emblematic *semah* (Dinçer, 2000) were formative in the so-called Alevi revival (van Bruinessen, 1996). Representations of such performances became core symbols of 'Aleviness', which made them also a major aesthetic resource in Alevi culture. Consequently, Alevi rituals received the status of UNESCO registered intangible heritage items on a national level in Turkey (UNESCO, 2010), and there are ongoing similar processes in other countries where Alevis have settled (Weineck, 2014, 2015). Despite this, Alevis often complain of a lack of 'authenticity' in the contemporary Alevi ritual (Zimmermann, 2018). And yet, contemporary rituals and ceremonies preserve and reproduce rites and ritual elements constitutive for the Alevi tradition (Langer, 2008). When we start from the basic rites that occur in many more complex Alevi rituals, we can distinguish elements that are means of reproduction of a certain Alevi 'habitus' and therefore part of an embodied Alevi identity. To conceptualise this, it is helpful to approach Alevi ritual practice with a theory of bodily-and-material culture (Mohan, Warnier, 2017).

I draw on a body of audio-visual material collected during my fieldwork among Alevis in Turkey and Germany from 2003 to 2010 (Figure 1). The research was conducted within the Collaborative Research Centre 619 'Dynamics of Ritual' at the University of Heidelberg, financed by the German Research Council (DFG). The film footage together with some transcriptions of ritual texts and interviews, as well as the field notes, are archived at the University of Heidelberg in its audio-visual database *HeidICON*. They are available to interested scholars upon request.

In this contribution, I will draw on the original meaning of aesthetics as 'perception', specifically perception of bodily actions by the observer, and perception through bodily actions, that is, by participating. The latter, naturally, cannot be reproduced in the context of an academic publication. We also must keep in mind, that all the representations I refer to—both from the ethnographic material as well as from more 'professional' media—are likewise mediated, i.e. conveyed to a receiver by a specific medium, such as film (Grimes, 2002). It is an epistemic



Figure 1: *Cem* Ritual, *Karacaabmet Sultan Cemevi*, İstanbul © Christian Funke 2007.

fact that we cannot access cultural practice without mediatising, either through external media, or through our own body and its sensual perception.

Research on Alevism – ‘Collecting Culture’

When we assess research on Alevism, or Alevi religious culture, we notice that we are still in a period of collation. Besides historical data, creeds and beliefs have been collected; a realm of knowledge that falls into the academic field of religious studies, and, increasingly, into the field of theology, as we observe, implicitly or explicitly, an emergence of an Alevi theology (conf. Güzelmansur, 2012).

In terms of material culture, which is strongly connected to the body in my approach to cultural performance and aesthetics, we observe a certain gap in respect to Alevi culture. Notwithstanding the museums, such as the one in Hacıbektaş, or those in some Alevi villages including Ocak Köyü, Arapgir, which hold objects related to ritual activity, there is no representative collection of objects pertaining to Alevism. When it comes to performances, collecting was exactly what we did in the initial stage of the Heidelberg research project, resulting in the above-mentioned video database, documenting around fifty events and rituals in around three hundred films, each of usually one-hour duration.

Alevi rituals have not yet been analysed comparatively across a broad data basis, not the least because a representative and accessible body of data was lacking. However, there are some exceptions, namely the documentations and analyses of certain sections of Alevi rituals by Mehmet Ersal (2016) at the Katip Çelebi University in İzmir, and several rather prescriptive descriptions by Alevi non-academic authors and associations (e.g. Çağlayan 2002).¹ It would be a major task to bring research on belief systems, the material culture, and ritual practice under one umbrella for further inquiry into Alevism; a task only to be realised by a qualified research team bringing together all available sources and materials.

Research on Alevi Rituals in Heidelberg

My fieldwork conducted within the Heidelberg Collaborative Research Centre involved a variety of contexts of contemporary Alevi rituals: modern *cemevis* in İstanbul and in other Turkish cities; associations and *cemevis* in German towns; public events, such as in sport stadiums in İstanbul or Erzincan, but also in German contexts; and re-enactments of village rituals in villages north of Ankara and the province of Malatya, etc. This means that not all events were 'real' religious rituals from a common viewpoint; however, all involved the basic aesthetics of Alevi cultural religious performance. And even staged or mediatised events activated in the participant or the audience a certain Alevi habitus, if there is a basic socialisation into Alevism or knowledge of similar traditions. The staging and mediatising of rituals and performances is an unavoidable way of practising culture and religion in the modern world. Moreover, it is not possible nowadays that all members of a tradition take part in the practice of their tradition all the time—if it ever was—and it is not necessary to guarantee continuity. Delegation of active cultural practice to an engaged minority is common in contemporary circumstances. Interestingly, although pre-modern village communities have dissolved into scattered urbanised and diaspora contexts, modern means of media and communication link together remaining village communities and related urban and diaspora cultures in a 'constellation of practices', consisting of several related, overlapping 'communities of practice' (Langer, 2010).

In order to analyse dynamics of rituals and processes of bodily-and-material culture, participation in these cultural performances is necessary. The method of data acquisition, besides documenting the rituals on video tape, was participant observation. Over the years, I have gained increasing experience and confidence in taking part in the rituals—a kind of mimetic socialisation into *Alevilik* in its performative dimension.

¹ An attempt to analyse Alevi rituals in a transnational context on the basis of the Heidelberg material will be Langer, 2020 (forthcoming).

Transfer of Ritual

As an analytical tool for the analysis of contemporary Alevi rituals, the Heidelberg project initially applied the theory of ‘transfer of ritual’, developed in a research group at the Department for the Study of Religions (University of Heidelberg) (Langer *et al.*, 2006). The initial focus on ‘transfer’ was due to the primary focus of our research on the establishment of Alevi religious-ritual life in Germany, i.e. in a migration context. Alevi rituals had clearly been transferred into a new cultural environment in Germany, as well as in Turkish cities, where they underwent major adaptations and transformations from their formerly rural cultural context.

The generalised ritual transfer theory states that there is a direct, compelling connection between the context factors of any cultural practice—such as geography, historical context, society, economics, etc. (the domains of socio-cultural anthropology)—and the realisation of a cultural practice, such as religious ritual. The latter can be observed in the so-called dimensions of the ritual, externally defined properties of cultural practice, such as its communicative dimension, its performativity, its efficacy, its mediality, and not least in its aesthetics. All these concepts are applied and were partly developed or adjusted in the field of ritual studies (conf. Platvoet, 1995).

Observing and analysing these transformation processes was one basic tool for me in systematising contemporary Alevi ritual practice, starting from strictly empirical, that is, observable material. They included, for example, the shortening of ritual forms due to the socio-economic needs of an urban, industrialised context, where night-long rituals are no longer realisable by the participants; or the mediatisation of ritual performances via television and internet, most prominently on YouTube, among other developments. As far as I can assess, the mediatisation of Alevi rituals, beginning even before television and internet in printed publications (see e.g. Dinçer, 2009), was one major factor in the modern standardisation and aestheticisation of Alevi cultural practice.

The first Alevi journals came into existence at the end of the 1960s and into the 1970s, publishing texts on Alevi beliefs and practices (e.g. Yaman, 1970–1974). Beginning in the 1980s and increasing in the 1990s, a lively Alevi publication market made Alevi religious practices public in various forms and went as far as publishing ‘ritual manuals’ (Sarıönder, 2005). Soon after the liberalization of the Turkish media market, this conventional medium of printed text with occasional visual, mostly photographic, representations, was followed by radio and television stations directed by Alevi individuals and later also by Alevi institutions. These media outlets began with broadcasting religious rituals and other cultural performances, such as festivals and other political or cultural events. In recent years, the European Alevi Federation has set up a TV station. These and the Turkish stations are now a significant mediating channel for Alevi ritual knowledge, particularly in the European diaspora. The modern media has

thereby become another ritual context, besides the actual real-life performances. This change has induced a massive transformation of the religious practice from one in which ideally the whole village community was directly involved, into one in which the ‘whole’ community, which now comprises ideally all Alevis, is involved only virtually, perhaps similar to an ‘imagined community’ as described by Anderson (1991). Such virtual environments beyond television are playing a significant role, be it the interactive chats in Alevi forums (Zimmermann, 2018), e-mail lists, or the growing number of ritual performances broadcast via the internet.

Alevi Rituals in Modern Media

With the emergence of Alevi-run TV stations around the year 2000, large Alevi *cem* rituals, such as organised in 2006 by the *CEM Vakfi* in Ankara in a sports stadium, were also mediated through *CEM Vakfi*'s own TV channel *CEM TV*. Similarly, the *cem* ritual of the *CEM Vakfi* in their central *cemevi* in Yenibosna (İstanbul), in which I participated several times throughout 2003, was not only regularly filmed by Alevi participants for private use, but also broadcast by *CEM TV*, at times on a weekly basis. This broadcasted footage enabled television audiences to acquire, or at least rehearse, an Alevi ritual habitus through observation, without having to participate in the service (*ibadet*) on a weekly basis.

Alevi television stations have also been established in the European diaspora, such as *Yol TV* in Germany. Besides Alevi rituals conducted in Europe, they also include material from Turkey, even from rural contexts, such as a staged village *cem* ritual that took place in 2011 in Mezirme (Ballıkaya, Malatya), which was also documented by me. Despite the fact that the introductory speeches explicitly stated that it was ‘not a ritual’ (and long discussions and negotiations took place beforehand about the legitimacy of staging such an *ibadet*), the performance structures and aesthetics observably induced a ritual commitment and mode of behaviour, both within the ‘actors’ and within the audience, Alevi as well as non-Alevi.²

Basic Patterns, Infrastructure and Classification of Alevi Ritual Activity

Concerning the systematic description of contemporary Alevi rituals, I approach the material using the conceptual framework for the description of a living ritual tradition outlined by Michael Stausberg (2004). I start from the basic patterns of Alevi ritual activity, such as texts (e.g. names, formulae, ‘prayers’, poetry, songs, hymns), the characteristics of the redistribution of food and commensality, bod-

² This event took place as one activity conducted in the context of a large conference on Alevi culture and history in Malatya. See Khan, Langer, Ögütçü (2011).



Figure 2: *Meydan* and *Post* Area in a *Cemevi*, Malatya © Janina Karolewski 2009.

ies and spaces (spatial orientations, sensorimotorics, purity and food prescriptions, spatial demarcations, ritual areas and spaces, greeting rituals, collective-body configurations), objects (certificates, manuscripts/books, liturgical objects, musical instruments, votive objects, amulets), substances (liquids, light), temporal configurations (day, calendar, seasons) and different actor groups and basic performative structures. Figure 2 shows specific orientations of objects and bodies, spatial demarcations, ritual areas, greeting gestures and collective body configuration, here before the start of the actual ritual. Moreover, characteristic liturgical paraphernalia and iconographical significant votive objects are visible.

Infrastructures of ritual activity include the personnel and their religious roles, such as different religious specialists; places, such as traditional or modern *cemevis*, modern *cemevi* complexes, significant topographical and spatial relations in villages and modern city quarters, pilgrimage places and other spatial markers such as natural phenomena, graves, shrines, etc., private spaces, and nowadays also virtual spaces (representations in the internet). Within infrastructure, I also include the means of transmission and mediatisation of ritual activity—from the pre-modern techniques of training religious specialists and rehearsing the community, which include orality, scripturality, and mimetic participation, to modern mediatisations that add to or substitute ‘traditional’ ways of transmission, as described above.

Alevi ritual practice can be classified into recurring congregational ceremonies, lifecycle-based rituals, calendric events, and case-based performances. These comprise the wide scope of Alevi religio-cultural practice in contemporary times that must be documented and analysed in order to form a holistic picture of the aesthetics of Alevi ritual(ised) performances.

Collective-congregational ceremonies, which have a liturgical structure, involving specific rites, usually music, and often ritual dance, are differentiated in emic terminology in ceremonies called *muhabbet*, *Abdal Musa cemi*, *(ayin-i) cem*, or *görgü (cemi)* (Karolewski, 2005). Additional to the congregational assembly ceremony, ritual activities usually include animal sacrifice (*kurban*) and the distribution of food (*lokma*) as a performative framing marker for the ceremony itself (see Figures 3 and 4).

These collective ceremonies also have a specific spatial framing, such as a *cemevi* with a special room for the ritual (*cem salonu*), although in many pre-modern cases the *cem* might have been conducted in normal houses with a room large enough for the village community. Distinct rites of greeting while entering the room or the ritual space (*meydan*) and embodied forms of appropriate movement during the ritual induce a specific habitus among the participants, as we can see in a picture taking during a *cem* at the Karacaahmet Cemevi in Istanbul – Üsküdar (Figure 5).

Life-cycle based rituals in the context of childhood, male circumcision, marriage, the establishment of pseudo-kinship as patron of the circumcised boy (*kirve*, *kıvrı*) or between adult couples (*musabiblik*), as well as funeral (*cenaze*) and post-funeral commemoration rituals can involve elements also practiced during the regularly recurring congregational rituals, or be included into a regular *cem*. Congregational rituals are also sometimes performed at certain festive dates of the calendar, some according to the (old) solar calendar (Hızır fast, Hıdırellez). Calendrical performances according to the Islamic hicrî-kamerî calendar tend to be of a more general ‘Islamic’ character, for example for the two large Muslim festivals, or have a more ‘Shii’ character during the month of Muharrem, the month of mourning. Traditionally, at times of mourning *cem* rituals should not be performed; however, as congregational communal rituals, such ‘Muharrem evenings’ still bear the performative and aesthetic character of parts of the *cem*, especially as concerns the musical repertoire.

Case-based performances are for example ‘crisis rituals’, such as divination, amulet production, and healing, but also individual pilgrimages (*ziyaret*). Individual ‘visits’ to locally established places of devotion are sometimes performed during specific times of annual collective pilgrimage to famous sites, such as the shrines of Hacı Bektaş or Abdal Musa. In that way, case-based performances can coincide with calendric performances, repeated annually. In modern times these include large cultural-religious performance complexes, referred to as *etkinlik*, *şenlik*, or *kültür festivali*. Both in pre-modern and modern times, congregational *cem* ceremonies were included in more complex events, such as annual pilgrimages.



Figure 3: *Karacaahmet Sultan Cemevi*, İstanbul © Christian Funke 2007.



Figure 4: *Karacaahmet Sultan Cemevi*, İstanbul © Christian Funke 2007.



Figure 5: *Karacaahmet Sultan Cemevi*, İstanbul © Janina Karolewski 2009.

Like any ritual system of a specific culture, Alevi ritualism has a complex structure: smaller units (rites, such as lighting candles, bowing or prostrating, singing hymns) are bound into larger sequences (rituals). Several sequences are combined again into even larger units, such as the *cem*, which according to the theoretical classification of a ritual would be closer to a ceremony (Snoek, 1987, 2006). Additionally, there are even larger sequences in Alevi practices, in which several ceremonies are bound together. Typically, this happens where rituals or ceremonies take place over several days.

This is true for the pre-modern *cems*, which included the administration of justice and mediation sequences that were framed or followed by ritualised performances, but also for the modern festivals, lasting sometimes more than a day, where ritual elements are publicly performed on stage and shorter prayers sequences or even full *cem* rituals are conducted. The aesthetic and performative system of Alevi rituals are therefore full of ‘inter-rituality’ and ‘ritual citations’ (see Gladigow, 2004), such as citing ritual sequences or rituals in a different ritual complex or the occurrence of the same rite or rituals in differently denoted ceremonies. An important example of this is the *semab*-dance, which is performed both in the *cem*, but also at weddings (see Shankland, 2003) and festivals as well as in mediatised form over television and the internet (Tambar, 2010).

Sensorimotorics

In the field of sensual motoric actions (habitus, posture, and gestures), the worshipping gestures accompanying the ‘invocations’ in certain texts, especially the invocation of the names of religious figures regularly referred to in Alevi ritual, are one basic performance pattern. These resemble greeting gestures towards superiors and are widespread in the Middle East: placing the right hand on the chest and/or

the mouth or the forehead (see Figure 7). This can be supplemented by other gestures or movements, such as by prostration (*secde*), which is repeatedly exercised at certain moments of the *cem* ritual, followed by the kneeling position with the upper body bent over, a position that is kept during the prayer directed by the *dede* leading the congregation (see Figure 5). There are also other prayer postures while standing up. Public prayer, for example at funerals, follows the pattern of the orthodox Sunni majority standing with hands held forward with the palms facing up. This prayer posture can be observed in cases where common Islamic prayers, such as the *fatıba*, have been incorporated into the *cem* ritual. Specific to Alevi practice is, however, the standing with the big toe of the right foot atop the big toe of the left foot in the *ayak mübürleme* posture (lit. 'sealing the feet') performed while 'standing in *dar*' ('*dara durmak*', lit. 'remaining on the gallows'). The 'standing in *dar*' is also practiced in the centre of the ritual space (*meydan*) when a person is about to perform a ritual service (*bizmet*) or a different role in the ritual and steps in front of the *dede*. In addition to 'sealing the feet', the performer 'standing in *dar*' must fold his hands over his chest and incline the upper body and head slightly forward. This complete body gesture can be identified as a generic posture demonstrating humility in front of a superior (see Figure 6).

In addition to the casual sitting (*rahat*) during less ritualized phases of the ceremony, for example during the presentation of a *deyiş* hymn, there is also the upright kneeling. This posture is accompanied by rhythmical movements to some of the chants, primarily during the collective singing of the *tevhid* songs, during which hitting one's chest or thighs as a gesture of self-flagellation has become standard. This was not always the case in the villages, as my field research and interviewing of elder villagers have shown, where different forms, such as handclapping, were practiced. Thus, it is a standardization that is rapidly spreading over the modern transnational Alevi community and has found acceptance, not the least due to particularly impressive ritual performances during mass events broadcast on Alevi television (see Figure 7).

Probably also originating in more publicised events comes the collective singing of the Kerbela lament (commemorating the murder of Hüseyin there) at the end of the ritual, where all stand and hold the hands of each neighbouring person (see Figure 8).

In relation to the body, not any religiously sanctioned, ritualistic cleansing rules are carried out before the ritual, such as the public partial ablution before praying in a mosque. However, modern ritual manuals mention that one should arrive washed, clean and dressed in good but not overtly conspicuous clothes to worship.

The spatial structure within Alevi community rituals is determined, besides the above-mentioned focus on the *dede*, by the performative containment of the ritual space, which, in principle, can be realized in any spatial structure large enough for the participating congregation. The ritual space (*cem salonu*) can be created in any sufficiently large room, even in private homes, independently of a