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Staging a Ritual Dance Out of its Context

The Role of an Individual Artist in Transforming the Alevi *Semah*

Abstract

This essay examines a historical process in which a ritual dance event is staged out of its ritual context. It tells the story of an individual folk artist, Durmuş Genç, who singled out the dance aspect (namely the *semah*) of the Alevi *cem* ritual. Genç was a member of the Alevi community, an unorthodox Islamic sect in Turkey widely dispersed throughout Anatolia. Employed at Boğaziçi University in the late 1960s, he was exposed to the urban folk dance tradition in its heyday through the members of the University Folklore Club. The exchange between Genç and the members of the Folklore Club led the Alevi *semahs* to be staged for the first time by non-Alevi performers, and as part of a “Turkish folk dance” repertoire. The essay shows how an individual artist had a significant impact on the nationalization of a ritual dance and also examines his responses to the issue of “style” in dance.

Keywords: Turkish—Alevi—*semah*—ritual dance—style

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A CORE PROBLEM of dance ethnography has often been the distinguishing of the dance event from its ritual context.* Where does the dance begin and end becomes a significant question within the ritual context. Dance ethnographers prefer not to take the dance event out of its ritual context, except perhaps for analytical purposes, and rather study the dance as a “structured movement system,” in its relation to the ritual (KAEPPLER 1967, 1986). This essay, however, tells us the story of a man, Durmuş Genç, who singled out the dance aspect (*semah*) of a ritual (*cem*)¹ that he continues to practice in his own community in Istanbul. Durmuş Genç (b. 1939) is an Alevi, a member of an unorthodox Islamic sect in Turkey which is widely dispersed throughout Anatolia. Employed at Boğaziçi University (then named Robert College)² in the late 1960s, he was exposed to the urban folk dance tradition in its heyday through students who were members of the Boğaziçi University Folklore Club, or BÜFK.³ The exchange between Genç and members of BÜFK led to the staging of Alevi *semahs* for the first time by non-Alevi performers as part of a “Turkish folk dance” repertoire. Serving as the “tea maker” (*çaycı*)⁴ of the hall where Folklore Club dancers regularly rehearsed, Durmuş Genç was exposed for the first time to the variety of different dance genres around Anatolia. He was therefore eager to show the students the only dance genre he knew, the Alevi *semahs*. In the late seventies, urban folk dancing was organized mainly by schools and universities and also in private folk dance associations called *folklor dernekleri*.⁵ In these associations the practice of folk dancing consisted of year-long instruction in various local dances representing different regions of Turkey. Urban performers, mostly students, learned these dances through rehearsals and performed them on stage at an end-of-year show.

Durmuş Genç, a native performer, and the university students of BÜFK, urban folk dance performers, developed a mutual interest in a number of ways. As an Alevi, Genç wanted to promote his own culture, which had been subject to centuries-long suppression by the state and by the general Sunni public. As a folk artist, he was eager to be part of the performance context of BÜFK, which offered him a relatively more receptive milieu at a university often associated

with American culture. As a competent *saz*⁶ player and *semah* performer himself, Genç also appreciated the fact that the students took folk dancing seriously in contrast to the Alevi youth he observed in the Hisarüstü Alevi community where he lived. Born in Istanbul, young Alevis were more inclined to experience urban modernity rather than revive their Alevi roots. This trend significantly changed from the 1970s up to the present. Since the early 1990s, Alevi organizations developed special programs for young Alevis. The rise of Islamic fundamentalism became also an important factor in the revival of Alevi identity.⁷ These developments led to an increase in the number of Alevi performers of *semahs* in its staged form. The display of a religious ritual on stage was at times criticized, but the teaching and staging of the *semahs* also opened some ground for socialization among different Alevi migrants within the urban context. Durmuş Genç actively took part in these debates along with his brother, Abbas Genç, and promoted staged performances of the *semahs*. They both took part in the founding of an Alevi association in Karacaahmet.⁸

Going back to the 1970s, one should also note how the non-Alevi students of the Boğaziçi University Folklore Club developed a keen interest in Durmuş Genç. First and foremost, Genç's presence represented to the students a gateway to a new—and even mysterious—dance genre, which had remained disguised for many years. Up until that point, the *semah* had never been taken out of its ritual context. Therefore, staging this long-time concealed genre, the mysterious *semah*, would be a novelty for the urban folk dance audience. Since the 1930s, the Turkish folk dance repertoire had been consolidated and new collections were always welcome so as to attract the attention of audiences.⁹ Therefore, when Genç introduced them to the *semah* for the first time, the students were happy to include this new genre in their existing folk dance repertoire. However, the dance genre was not the only aspect of the Alevi *semahs* that attracted the students' attention. The 1970s was a time when Turkey was highly politicized between left and right ideologies,¹⁰ and in the *semahs* they found a way to voice their protest. Performing Alevi *semahs* on stage became almost a heroic act, a symbolic performance, where dance spoke for unspoken ideas. Within a context that was too risky to voice leftist or anti-state ideas, the performance of the *semah* was being used as an expressive form of protest in itself.

Given the above framework, the following essay will try to situate the past contribution of an individual artist to contemporary Turkish culture. In the light of a socio-historical development of the Alevi culture, its focus will be the particular role of Durmuş Genç in singling out the *semah* from its *cem* ritual context. The essay will elaborate on two important dimensions in examining the case of Durmuş Genç: (1) Genç's role in putting the *semah* on stage for non-Alevi performers as a new genre of Turkish folk dance; (2) Genç's perception

of “style” among various performances of the same *semah* genres under the newly formed Alevi associations.

WHY ALEVI CULTURE WAS SUPPRESSED: A HISTORICAL SURVEY

The unorthodox Islamic stance of Alevism (*Alevilik*) has developed through a particular historical process. Until Sunni Islam became more dominant in the Ottoman Empire in the sixteenth century, different belief practices (rooted in Central Asian shamanism but also influenced by other religions such as Gregorian and Orthodox Christianity of Greeks and Armenians) survived throughout the Anatolian lands.¹¹ As the Safavid threat in the east grew stronger in the sixteenth century, the Ottoman state became intolerant to other practices of Islam apart from those of the Sunni. This is when the oppression of Alevi communities began. They were judged to be “cooperators” of the Safavids and were called *kızılbaş* (red-heads), in reference to the red turbans of the Safavid soldiers. Thereafter, the Alevis were oppressed not only by the state, but were also disliked by the Sunni community. In the collective memories of most Sunni groups, the Alevi communities have not been considered to be “proper Muslims,” and their villages and neighborhoods have been marked as the world of “the other.”¹²

Nevertheless, Alevis consider themselves “Muslims,” but their practice of Islam differs from that of orthodox Sunni Muslims in a variety of ways. Alevis do not pray five times a day, they do not always fast during the month of Ramadan, and they do not visit Mecca for pilgrimage. Rather than using mosques as religious shrines, in rural contexts they gather in houses and more recently, in urban settings, they prefer to gather in large public halls (*cemevi*) that allow *semah* performances. Another distinct way of Islamic practice among the Alevis of Asia Minor, which has long been interpreted as a “deviation” from orthodox Islam, is related to gender relations. There is not much segregation between men and women. Alevis attend *cem* rituals and perform the *semahs* together as mixed groups. Many Sunni communities despise the Alevi *cem* ritual, often referring to it as the *mum söndü* ritual, the implication being that couples exchange sexual partners after candles have been extinguished.

Following the foundation of the Republic in 1923, the state’s approach towards the Alevis was rather ambiguous. On one hand, the Alevi community at large conformed to the social and cultural transformation promoted by the Republican reforms, such as women’s emancipation or secularism. Alevi’s *cem* ritual did not exclude women from the public sphere and their prayers were in Turkish, as opposed to the practice of Sunni Islam. In that respect, the Alevi community at large constituted an important support group for the early Republican regime. Nevertheless, in continuing the Ottoman tradition, the

Republican state adopted Sunni Islam in formulating its policies on religious affairs and disregarded the Alevi belief system. Even today, the principal official organization regulating religious affairs (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı) does not allocate funding for the establishment of any ritual place nor pay a salary to religious leaders of the Alevi community.

From the 1950s, some members of Alevi communities, like many others in Anatolia, began to move from their villages to the large cities in search of new employment and educational opportunities. The regroupment of the Alevis in urban centers took another decade, and it was not until after the 1960s that urban Alevi associations began to be established. Since the 1960s, Alevi organizations and the performance of *semahs* gained more public recognition with the staged shows performed by the Alevi emigrants to the urban settings. The non-Alevi groups, mostly university students or members of leftist organizations, also developed an interest in the public display of Alevi cultural forms, mainly in *semahs*. The leftist interest in the *semahs* was based on the reputation the Alevi communities had of being oppressed by the authoritarian Ottoman state structure.¹³

The Alevi community discussed in this study formed around such an urban association founded in Istanbul in 1969, the aforementioned Karacaahmet Derneği. This association committed itself to the protection of the shrine of Karacaahmet, the fourteenth century spiritual leader of the Bektashi order. Like many other similar shrines of Muslim Saints, it is considered to be a place for sacred visits. The association itself serves members of various Alevi communities who migrated from areas like Sivas, Tokat, Malatya, Samsun, Gümüşhane, and Şebinkarahisar to Istanbul from the 1950s.

THE PLACE OF SEMAH PERFORMANCE WITHIN THE CEM RITUAL

The religious practice of the Alevis, called the *cem* ritual or the *cem* ceremony, is essentially performed in a closed group of members of the community gathered in a private house or a public indoor space. This gathering is directed by a religious leader called the *dede*. Known for their wisdom and trusted and respected by all community members, in the past the *dedes* traveled through various Alevi villages leading one particular *cem* session in each village. The *cem* would be an occasion for the *dede* to lecture on human values, most often accompanied by religious stories. He would lead the ritual with the help of a number of assistants chosen from the village community. Depending on the particular situation of each village, he would lead the initiation rites of children or would marry couples. The *cem*s would also allow people to discuss, in the presence of the *dede*, community problems such as unpaid debts, long-lasting misunderstandings, or unresolved disagreements.

The *cem* ritual is ideally structured around a set of practices called “the twelve services” and is performed by twelve assistants. These are (1) the *dede*, (2) the *rehber* (guide), (3) the *gözcü* (“eye keeper” who maintains the order of the ritual), (4) the *çerağcı* (light keeper), (5) the *zakir* (folk singer), (6) the *süpürgeci* (sweeper who marks the ritual space), (7) the *saki* (drink master), (8) the *sofracı* (cook), (9) the *pervane* (a person guarding the inside and the outside), (10) the *peyik* (caller who invites people to the ritual), (11) the *iznikçi* (cleaning person), and (12) the *bekçi* (doorman). The ritual begins with the prayer led by the *dede* who then invites his assistants to participate. The sweeper opens the ritual place, then those community members who want to go through a rite of passage move to the center. Following the serving of the food (usually sacrificial lamb), the lighter lights the candles and an assistant helps those who want to wash their hands. Following a particular song, *miraçlama*, performed by the folk singer, the four most prominent members of the community perform the *semah* dance. This particular *semah* is called *kırklar semahı*, and it marks the opening of the floor for other people to join in. In Alevi terminology, this movement system is called “to turn *semah*” (*semah dönme*), referring to the circular form of the group and the whirling of the individuals. *Semah dönme* is considered to be only one section of the overall ritual. Therefore, within the *cem* ritual, *semah* is undoubtedly perceived as a particular movement system, but it is still a “ritual movement system” and not a separate dance event. In the ritual context, then, *semah* is perceived as just one among other ritual movements such as sweeping, or saluting the *dede*.

The Alevi *semah* is believed to have originated from a religious story about the Prophet Mohammed. According to the story, the Prophet Mohammed visits a group of thirty-nine people who were indifferent to his newly rising Islamic thought. At the meeting they offered the Prophet a grape and told him to divide it into forty equal parts. When he said that it is not possible, one of them squeezed the grape and offered one drop to each. All of them were so moved by this event that they all began whirling, including the Prophet himself, who then decided that these people are true saints. The *semahs* are therefore believed to be derived from this original whirling of the forty people, called the *Kırklar Semahı* (“the *semah* of the forty”), and they are believed to have been modified in various ways depending on regional differences: *semahs* of the Mediterranean areas such as Antalya and Fethiye differ from those one can observe in Central Anatolia like the *semahs* of Tokat and Şiran.

THE CASE OF DURMUŞ GENÇ: INVENTOR OF A NEW TRADITION

Durmuş Genç moved from Şebinkarahisar (in the Black Sea region) to Istanbul during the early 1960s. In fact, he followed his older brother, Abbas Genç.

They both found jobs at Boğaziçi University, which is located at the hills of the Bosphorus. They settled in Hisarüstü, a neighborhood next to the university campus. One can even state that, in fact, with many other Alevis coming from the towns of Tokat, Gümüşhane, and Sivas, they contributed to the establishment of a residential area in Hisarüstü, building their own homes and opening small businesses.

In Hisarüstü, the Genç brothers continued their religious practices by joining the *cem*s organized by the *dedes* who had settled in the Hisarüstü neighborhood. Durmuş Genç who was the folk singer of the two, played his *saz* for the *semah* performances during the rituals in Istanbul. Employed at the university dormitories for male students, he had access to the Alevi students studying at Boğaziçi University. With his devotion to folk music, he soon was noticed by students performing folk dances in the BÜFK.

In the early 1970s, two Alevi students from the Club asked him to perform his dances to the other Club members. Following Genç's performance, the Folklore Club decided to stage the *semahs* and asked him to teach them. In cooperation with the university students, Genç had in fact initiated a wholly new cultural form to the then consolidated folk dance repertoire: for the first time, *semahs* of the Şiran area were being taught to students with no Alevi background. This was a rather radical shift in the performance of the *semahs* in two ways. Not only were the *semahs* removed from their ordinary ritual context and performed by non-Alevi performers, but they were also framed as a new genre of the Turkish folk dance repertoire.¹⁴

In fact, the public performance of the *semahs* in Istanbul was not entirely foreign to Durmuş Genç. During the initial years after his arrival in Istanbul, he had taken part in activities organized by another Alevi Association, Hacibektaş Derneği, and played *saz* to their members who "whirled *semahs*."¹⁵ But he was only one of the many other Alevi *saz* players who accompanied the members of the association on special nights organized by the different Alevi communities gathering in Istanbul. Although these occasions provided the opportunity for *semahs* to be performed in a different context than the *cem* ritual, *semahs* were still performed by the Alevis themselves, who were celebrating their reunion in a context other than their native towns. Hence, these occasions were very different from the activities held at the Boğaziçi University Folklore Club.

On one occasion in 1979, however, Genç was unable to gather the *semah* group from his Hisarüstü neighborhood for the special annual gathering of the Alevis at the Hacibektaş festivities in Nevşehir.¹⁶ Although some young people of his neighborhood promised that they would accompany him to the Hacibektaş festivities, they had to withdraw in order to visit their native towns during harvest time. Disappointed, Durmuş Genç contacted the students he trained at the Boğaziçi University Folklore Club and participated in the festivities with them.

In his narrative of this event, Genç stresses the “seriousness” of these young performers at “rehearsal time.” Through this cooperation, Genç developed a sense of “professional dancing,” not in the sense of getting paid, but rather in the sense of the performers taking the dance activity seriously. These young people were organized in such a way that they could determine where sections of a *semah* began and ended. Thus, they committed all their time and energy to reaching a high level of competence in performance, ultimately enjoying the success of the stage performance.

If the university students have had an impact on Durmuş Genç as the “producer” of staged *semahs*, this occurred on the level of repertoire. At that time—and today as well—folk dance clubs and associations offered not just one dance genre but required their teaching staff to perform a large repertoire of dance genres belonging to different parts of Turkey. Exposed to this diversity of dances, Durmuş Genç developed an interest in learning other *semah* melodies and movements than those of his native town, Şebinkarahisar. His informants were either Alevi students residing in Boğaziçi University dormitories, performers from other Anatolian towns participating in the Hacibektaş festivities, or those involved in special performances held in Istanbul. From radio broadcasts, Genç also had the opportunity to learn new *semah* melodies or to revise the ones already in his repertoire.

The *semahs* taught by Durmuş Genç formed part of the Boğaziçi University Folklore Club’s repertoire until 1986. Later, Genç retired from his duties at the university and most of his students graduated. Using his connections with the Karacaahmet Derneği, he opened a free *semah* course for the children of Alevi visitors and members of the Karacaahmet Derneği. To most Alevi families who had moved to an urban environment, this was a chance to familiarize their children with Alevi culture. Given the fact that the second generation of Alevis were born in Istanbul into a completely different culture than that of their parents’ native towns, and that public schools did not provide any religious teaching other than Sunni Islam, many young Alevis learned the rules of *cem* rituals and the *semah* performances in these newly developing urban cultural associations. Karacaahmet Derneği was perhaps one of the leading organizations in this respect.

Yet Durmuş Genç explains the need to establish his *semah* course in a more modest way. According to him, before the opening of the course at Karacaahmet Derneği, the administrators of the association could not gather a group to participate in the Hacibektaş festivities. In the past, Genç usually gathered a randomly selected performer group mostly comprised of residents in his own neighborhood. But in most cases, their parents did not give their children permission to leave town in order to participate in the Hacibektaş festivities. Missing the com-

mited dancers of the Boğaziçi University Folklore Club, he started a course at Karacaahmet Derneği as a way to solve such managerial issues.

Whatever the reason of its opening, the training course has now created its own tradition. Borrowing many elements from the folk dance tradition, the repertoire of the Association comprises a series of *semahs* from different parts of the country, thus revealing a “national potpourri” of the *semah* genres. As in the folk dance clubs, *semah* performers follow a certain choreography designed by Durmuş Genç. And again, like other folk dance associations, they “represent” Turkey in international festivals.

These days, *semah* performances of Karacaahmet Derneği operate at three different levels. First, the young urban Alevis follow the course taught by Durmuş and Abbas Genç and rehearse every Sunday in preparation for the Hacibektaş festivities in August, other festivals abroad, or other occasions they are invited to attend. Second, many middle-aged and elderly Alevis now residing in Istanbul visit Karacaahmet’s shrine quite regularly. On these occasions, they usually make a wish or sacrifice a lamb to offer thanks for the realization of a wish that has been fulfilled. Every Saturday and Sunday, the Association provides free food to the public. Following this meal at noon, the visitors gather in the small *cemevi* to participate in a public *cem* ritual. To many, this occasion offers a rare opportunity to perform their native town’s *semah* as they remember it from their childhood. In many cases, they approach the *saz* player and ask him to play the tone of that particular *semah*, so that they can perform in the accompaniment of that music. Third, the *cem* ritual follows sometimes an “instructive” pattern, both to the public and to the attending members of the *semah* courses. This is the case when the ritual is staged as a whole. In all cases, what is being experienced under the aegis of the Association is the reconstruction of an Alevi identity through the invention of new traditions, with their own religious, social, and national dimensions.

DIFFERENT GENERATIONS, DIFFERENT STYLES:

ALEVI SEMAH PERFORMANCES IN THEIR CHANGING CONTEXT

Put into a comparative perspective, the regional and urban practices of *semahs* offer an interesting platform to discuss the issue of style in dance context.¹⁷ Dick HEBDIGE (1979) examines how style challenges the principle of unity and cohesion, and contradicts the myth of “consensus.” Hebdige, in his ethnography of an urban subculture, sees style as a marker of refusal and identifies it as a generator of meaning and significance. His study, which focuses on the creation of meaning through stylistic differences, thus explores the emergence of new forms: in this case, style leading toward the formation of cultural expression. Yet, as much

as the marker of wholly new meanings, style can also mark changes of meanings in well-defined genres.

The main question here is how style operates within the limits of a dance genre, how the stylistic variations may mark difference within the boundaries of the sameness rather than creating new types or sub-genres. To illustrate this point, let us focus on two types of Alevi *semahs*: the Mengi and the Tokat *semahı*, which are performed in different contexts. The first two examples are from the local practices and the following two are from reunion festivals organized to gather Alevis from different parts of Turkey. The two local performances of the Mengi and the Tokat *semahı* are not filmed during actual *cem* rituals. They were recorded during a research trip to İzmir and Tokat, organized by the renowned dance scholar Metin And and his students at Ankara University in the early 1980s. The second context, the reunion festival of Abdal Musa şenlikleri, was filmed by BÜFK in 1995. My own fieldwork was conducted in Karacaahmet Derneği. I was able to review the visual data with Durmuş Genç of the Karacaahmet Derneği, whose comments were most illuminating for the purpose of my analysis of style regarding the *semah* performances in their changing contexts.

Durmuş Genç is proud of his own group of *semah* performers from Karacaahmet Derneği, describing them as “disciplined” and “well-rehearsed” dancers. He is influenced by the energy of the folk dance movement and he likes “order” and “floor-patterns” in stage performance. Like all folk artists he also has a fine understanding of what “a good dancer” and “a good mover” is. To him, a “good” *semah* performer is characterized by his/her competence not only in whirling but in whirling quickly; he/she should use the whole body to make even a simple figure, and must have a good sense of coordination. “Our style,” he says, “is defined by its speed and by [the performer’s] competence in bodily coordination.” Watching the local performers of the Mengi *semahı*, he says “Go and do it until the next morning, would you get tired? No!” Referring to the advanced ages of the local Mengi performers and the contrast they make with the relatively younger performers of his Karacaahmet group, he adds, “These old women, how can they participate in competitions at reunion festivals?” According to Durmuş Genç, his performers “fly like birds when they turn the *semahı*!” Comparing the local Mengi performance of two elderly ladies to that of performers in the reunion festival, he finds the style of the Antalya Hacibektaş Veli Kültür Tanıtma Derneği dancers closer to his Karacaahmet group. He states that “their arms and their knees are raised higher than those of the two elderly ladies, they are better performers.” It is partly because the Hacibektaş performers emphasize the transition between different motifs more strongly than the two elderly ladies. Nevertheless, youth does not always guarantee a good performance, according to Genç. He criticizes the performance of the Tokat *semahı*

by young local boys, finding them, in this case, “not slow enough!” When he compares their performance to that of his brother’s at the reunion festival, he calls attention to the distinction between a childish or play-like performance and a ritual dance that is well-balanced and coordinated.

Costumes also mark a stylistic difference. Although Durmuş Genç may not be impressed by the performance quality of some urban *semah* troupes, he appreciates their clean and bright costumes. The “order” and “design” of the costumes and of the overall floor patterning are also important determinants of style. Durmuş Genç distinguishes his own group’s style from that of the local performers, but he also knows how to distinguish it from his counterparts, that is, other urban Alevi associations’ performance groups. Şahkulu Sultan Derneği’s performance is a case in point. Genç thinks that the new Alevi associations do not yet have a well-established repertoire. They are influenced by the stage adaptations of *semahs* performed by university students. In the 1980s the Drama Department of Ankara University stylized various *semahs* to put them on stage as an enactment of a *cem* ritual. This had a great impact on the newly forming Alevi *semah* groups, and many of those have adopted the *mis-en-scène* initiated by Ankara University students. Durmuş Genç, with all his respect for the orderly representation of *semahs*, draws a line between what he calls the “original” *semahs* and a set of *semah*-like movements performed to the accompaniment of Alevi music. Therefore, in this respect, he criticizes parts of Şahkulu Sultan Derneği performance as being “newly created *semahs*,” or “*semahs* which do not make part of the *cem*.” In other words, he finds structural problems in those types of performances: to him, the compilation of a series of *semah* motifs does not add up to form a *semah* structure. He compares the performance of the same *semah*, the Erzincan *semahı*, by both groups: “We take a wider angle,” he says, “and not just with the arms but with the whole body!” But immediately he adds, “Their costumes, however, are nicer.”

Genç carefully confines his stage repertoire to the *semahs* performed in *cem* rituals, yet he still distinguishes his own style from those who perform at an actual *cem* ritual. Watching a *semah* performance during a *cem* in Elazığ, he appreciates the musician’s competence but finds the *semah* performers inapt, seeing them as people who do not know how to “move.” Yet, he does have problems with the other extreme too: the so-called “stylized” *semahs* and staged *cem* rituals performed by the Boğaziçi University students in the early 1990s. He finds them rather militant, emphasizing the multiethnic composition of the Alevi groups (the Turcomans, the nomads, and the Kurds). He also thinks that they “bounce too much,” and he is critical of their “ballerina shoes.” “Style,” in Durmuş Genç’s terms, is perhaps defined somewhere between “the traditional” and “the modern,” both having their own boundaries. It is traditional in the sense that he is attached to the structure of the *semah* performances within the

cem context and to the musical competence of the folk singer, yet modern in the sense that he enjoys the swift performance and the enhanced coordination of movements along with the shiny colors of the newly prepared costumes. Nevertheless, we should add, although style marks a difference from the other contexts of performance and from other performers, Durmuş Genç does not want to be overly critical of these other styles displayed in public performances. After all, he says, they all serve to the mediation of Alevi culture; style, in this case, operates to distinguish yourself from “your others” rather than from “the others.”

CONCLUSION

The historical process through which the Alevi *semah* shifted from being a ritual dance (or a ritual movement system) toward a staged folk dance genre reminds us of the importance of social context in the analysis of meaning in dance. In other words, the meaning of a dance event derives mainly from its social context, which can be a ritual performance, a festive event, or a staged art form at a given time and place. The particular role of Durmuş Genç in making a transition from an intimate ritual space towards a stage performance is a case in point. It shows how an individual artist can be influential in the development of a new cultural form. Although the rise of the Alevi *semah* as a staged dance form cannot be fully reduced to Genç’s initiative, it would also be hard to deny his pioneering role in imagining the *semah* as a staged dance event. This new form is now a legitimate widespread genre for the urban Alevi communities. The transformation that Durmuş Genç went through as an “insider” of the Alevi culture led him to later observe his own differences with other “insiders.” Perceptions of style among different Alevi *semah* groups undoubtedly led Genç to question “differences in similarities.” There, a new question emerges for dance ethnographers on how to cope with the changing concepts of the “local,” the “insider,” or the “native” in analyzing modern forms of dance.

NOTES

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1. The term *cem* is pronounced *djem* in Turkish.
2. Boğaziçi University, the first American University established outside the USA, was founded in 1863.
3. BÜFK is the abbreviation of Boğaziçi Üniversitesi Folklor Kulübü.
4. *Çaycı* refers to an employee who serves tea during the working hours of an institution, be it a firm, a school, or a public office.
5. *Folklor dernekleri* are privately established urban folk dance centers, offering courses

in different regional dances from around Turkey. For a detailed analysis of urban folk dancing see ÖZTÜRKMEN 2002.

6. *Saz* is a traditional string instrument, widely used by minstrels throughout Anatolia.

7. For an analysis of this change, see DİNÇER 1998.

8. Karacaahmet is known as a fourteenth-century spiritual leader of the Bektashi Order. His tomb in Üsküdar-Istanbul has been an important Bektashi center until the Republican times. The association which was established in 1969 to restore the tomb has now become one of the main Alevi centers in Istanbul. Although the full name is Karacaahmet Sultan Kültürünü Tanıtma-Dayanışma ve Türbesini Onarma Derneği (Association for the advance of and support for Karacaahmet culture and the restoration of His Tomb), I will refer to the association as Karacaahmet Derneği in the text.

9. The consolidation of the folk dance repertoire in Turkey has been a historical process whereby some local dances survived while others have been forgotten. For a detailed review see ÖZTÜRKMEN 2002.

10. The 1970s witnessed the rise of a leftist youth movement under a series of right-wing governments, which created enormous tension in public life. For a survey of the political polarization in Turkey since the 1970s, see BORA 2000.

11. Turkish penetration into the Anatolian peninsula began by the eleventh century. The Ottoman state, which was only consolidated by the thirteenth century, identified itself more with its dynasty than with Islam. Following the campaigns to the Arabic lands during the sixteenth century, Sunni Islam became the state religion at the expense of other sects of Islam.

12. For a more detailed historical survey of the Alevi community, see MELIKOFF 1994.

13. For an analysis of the post-1960 organization of the urban Alevi organizations, see DİNÇER 2000.

14. For a more detailed analysis of the history of the Turkish folk dance movement and its relation to nationalism, see ÖZTÜRKMEN 1993, 262–313.

15. Hacı Bektaş Veli is one of the foremost figures in late Medieval Sufism and the patron saint of the Bektashi Order. Karacaahmet, the Anatolian mystic mentioned earlier, is considered to be one of his disciples. For more information, one can refer to his hagiography (GÖLPINARLI 1995).

16. The Hacıbektaş festival known as Hacıbektaş Şenliği has been celebrated since the early 1960s in August in commemoration of Hacı Bektaş Veli. In recent years, the festival became a central event to bring together different Alevi communities from around Turkey.

17. This section is based on visual data provided to me by Dr. Metin And (Professor Emeritus, Ankara University) and the Boğaziçi University Folklore Club. My deepest thanks go to Durmuş Genç of the Karacaahmet Derneği for his feedback on this visual data.

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