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The Sufi Mystical Idiom in Alevi Aşık Poetry: Flexibility, Adaptation and Meaning

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Introduction

- 1 The religious tradition of the Alevis in Turkey is characterized in large part by mysticism. Definitions vary, but the broad understanding of mysticism is that it denotes an interest in the experiential knowledge of God rather than, or in addition to, adherence to text-based religious law. In the Alevi case, the mystical pursuit is complex. Whilst it is strongly influenced by the precepts of classical Sufi thought, as well as elements of Sufi ritual practice, Alevilik also draws on the theological motifs and concerns of other religious and cultural traditions, namely, Shi'a Islam and pre-Islamic Turkic shamanism. These influences complicate Alevi cosmology and approaches therein to mystical encounter with God.
- 2 There is no clear codification of Alevi mystical religious belief in the form of a written text or creed. Alevilik existed in Anatolia for centuries as a predominately oral tradition, and religious knowledge was transmitted from one generation of Alevi leaders (known as *dedes*) to the next through the singing of didactic oral poetry.¹ This ritual poetry addresses the following themes: adulation of Ali and the Twelve Imams of Shi'ism (*Düvazımam*); mourning for the martyrs of the Battle of Karbala (*Mersiye*); and the retelling of the Alevi interpretation of the Islamic Miraj story (*Miraçlama*). Such poetry forms the backbone of the central Alevi religious ritual, the *cem* ceremony. Whilst the Alevis do not generally reject the written word of the Qur'an, they have not traditionally emphasized it in their religious life; indeed, the centrality and sanctity of sung poetry within the tradition is demonstrated by the euphemistic term '*telli Kuran*'

(stringed Qur'an), used reverentially to refer to the *saz* (Turkish lute), which accompanies the performance of poetry in the *cem*.

- 3 The role of poetry in Alevi society extends beyond the 'sacred' space of the *cem*. Singer-poets known as *aşiks* (lit. 'lovers' of God) also perform a crucial function in day-to-day Alevi life. The *aşık* serves as a kind of voice of his (or, occasionally, her) community, and the poetry may address themes ranging from mystical and profane love to appreciation of the natural world, physical and economic hardship and suffering, and socio-political comment, often tending towards rebellion and dissent. The poetry spans sacred and profane themes without necessarily drawing boundaries between them (Dressler 2003).
- 4 Much of the language of Alevi *aşık* poetry is familiar from the classical Persian Sufi verse of poets such as Hafiz, Sa'di and Rumi. It is in this common poetic idiom that the Sufi foundations of Alevilik are perhaps most clearly evident. Yet whilst Alevi poetic language and concerns are familiar from the Sufi canon, the meanings that lie behind that language are, significantly, often quite divergent from mainstream Sufism and are particular to the Alevi context. The language of Persian mystical poetry articulates a complex theology based on the Qur'anic revelation as its major source. In the Alevi case, the language is often used more flexibly and carries different associations that, in turn, reflect the distinctive characteristics of the Alevi mystical worldview.
- 5 In this article, I explore that worldview through an ethnographic study of the poetry and life experience of a contemporary Alevi *aşık* called Ozan Seyfili.² I begin by analyzing one of Seyfili's major early poems, called *Yolcuyum Yolumda* (I Am A Traveller On My Way) in light of the Persian Sufi influence on it. I then move on to discuss other examples of Seyfili's work, in which his usage of the Sufi idiom appears to diverge from the Persian comparison, and contain meanings and referents that are specifically Alevi. I conclude by discussing the status of the community in the Alevi mystical pursuit, which I suggest is distinctive and somewhat elevated.

Ozan Seyfili

- 6 Seyfili is the pen-name of Hüseyin Yorulmaz, who was born in the 1940s in the province of Erzincan, central-eastern Anatolia. He has been composing and singing poetry to his own *saz* accompaniment all his life. Seyfili is a member of an extended family of *dedes* called the Derviş Cemal Ocak, and as such, he is qualified by birth to potentially lead his Alevi community (Tee 2010). He was apprenticed in his youth in rural Erzincan in the art of leading a *cem* ceremony, and in performing the ritual poetry therein.³ Outside the ritual space his poetic mentor, a rural *aşık* also from Erzincan called Beyhani, shaped his early development as an *aşık*. The influence of Beyhani's traditional, rural mysticism is very evident in Seyfili's early poetry.
- 7 In the early 1960s, like many of his fellow Alevis, Seyfili left the village of his birth and migrated first to Istanbul and then to West Germany. He remained there as a migrant laborer until the early 1980s, whereupon he returned to Turkey and settled on the outskirts of Antalya, where he lives today. Throughout the late 1960s and the 1970s, Seyfili was heavily involved in the socialist movement that attracted many in the Alevi community at the time. His involvement in Alevi religious practice ground to a halt, and he became instead intensely politically active. As such, much of his poetry of that era reflects a Marxist political agenda. Since the so-called 'Alevi revival' of the late 1980s, Seyfili has consciously returned to Alevilik and has been involved since that time

in nascent Alevi religious activity amongst the urban Alevi diaspora in the west of Turkey. Much of his recent poetry is concerned with Alevi identity and heritage, topics that are very pertinent within the contemporary movement.

- 8 The total corpus of Seyfili's poetry spans more than half a century, and incorporates poems addressing the broad range of themes that is typical of its genre (Silay 1998). With the exception of some of the extremely politicized poetry of the 1970s, the Sufi idiom is prevalent throughout, both in poetry that addresses religious topics directly as well as that which does not. Many of the early poems, which Seyfili wrote under the guidance of Aşık Beyhane as a young man in rural Erzincan, are particularly religious in character, and might be described as traditional, Sufi-inspired love sonnets. In his later work, Seyfili's use of the Sufi idiom becomes more flexible, and serves firstly as a broad vocabulary of suffering, often in reference to the historic persecution suffered by the Alevi community,⁴ and secondly as a metaphor of lament for the fragmentation of the Alevi community during the early migratory era. Here, the Sufi idiom – usually reserved for describing the quest of man for relationship with God – is used to describe the Alevi community itself, and Seyfili's nostalgia for the lost human relationships and shared religious ritual that had been the cornerstone of traditional, rural Alevilik.
- 9 Seyfili's use of the Sufi poetic idiom in this way reflects a major definitive aspect of Alevi mysticism: the primacy of the community of believers in the mystical quest (Gökalp 1980). Whilst the religious community generally plays an important part in most mystical traditions – Islamic as well as non-Islamic – in Alevilik, its status is greatly elevated. The theological framework for this elevation is provided by the mythological prototype of the *cem* ceremony, the so-called *Kırkların Cemi* or 'Cem of the Forty' (Yaman 1998). The 'Cem of the Forty' is the Alevi interpretation of the Islamic Miraj story, and its primary significance lies in its designation of Ali as the possessor of the secret knowledge of God – knowledge which, in the story, even the Prophet Muhammad himself is not privy to. The other important aspect of the story is the unity of the Forty, who are proto-Alevi believers: when one of them (Ali himself) is cut with a sword, all of them bleed simultaneously and even the blood of Selman, the only one who is not present, drips from the ceiling in solidarity with the group. They declare that, '*birimiz kırkımız, kırkımız birimiz*' ('we are one and we are forty, we are forty and we are one'). The *cem* ritual is intended to replicate this 'Cem of the Forty', and the primary mystical experience that is sought is a return to the spiritual unity of the Forty. This pursuit differs from that of the urban Sufi mystic, whose experience – whilst being rooted in his community, or brotherhood – ultimately seeks to transcend both the material world and his own self, and leave it behind as he is annihilated in (Arabic: *fana*), or united with God (Netton 2000).
- 10 The philosophical and theological framework of the 'Cem of the Forty' is a necessary backdrop to understanding the weighty emphasis on the human community in Alevi thought. It helps to explain the preoccupation in Alevilik with the primacy of '*insanlık*' (humanity, or the human being), and its tendency towards humanism and a pantheistic understanding of God and nature.⁵ In the selection of Ozan Seyfili's poems that follows, I explore the way in which his use of the Sufi poetic idiom is subtly transformed in a way that reflects the humanist emphasis and particularities of Alevi mystical thought.
- 11 Chronologically the first poem that Seyfili composed, which reflects the early influence of Aşık Beyhane and the rural mysticism of the pre-migratory era, is called *Yolcuyum Yolumda* (I Am A Traveller on My Way).⁶ It typifies the religious tenor of much of

Seyfili's early work, and represents a fairly conservative and traditional usage of the Sufi poetic idiom:

<p>Yolcuyum yolumda eyleme beni Söyle söylenecek sözün var ise Senin için yüce dağları aştım Gel bile gidelim arzun var ise. Kalayım bağında bahçıvan eyle Ben sana Mecnun'um yar bana Leyla Kusurum var ise yüzüme söyle Köle kıl beni lüzum var ise. Gönül kuşum uçar yüce dağlara Güç olur inmesi engin bağlara Aslanım düşmüşüm tuzak ağlara Öldür beni kalkan gürzün var ise. Seyfili'yim yara söyler sözünü Dön bu yana görem güzel yüzünü Aşkın için hedef tuttum özümü Öldür beni nişan gezin var ise. (1959, Tercan)</p>	<p>I am a traveller on my way; don't deprive me. If there are words to be said, then say them. I have scaled high mountains for you, Come and let's leave, if you desire it. Let me stay in your garden, make me its gardener. I am to you a Majnun, lover, you to me a Leyla. If you're offended at me tell me to my face; Render me a slave, and sell me if you must. My soul bird flies to the high mountains; Its descent to the spacious gardens is strength to it. My lion, I have fallen in the trap's net. Kill me, if you've a mace that will rise to do it. I am Seyfili, he speaks his words to the lover. Turn this way, let me see your beautiful face. For love of you I held a target on my soul; Kill me, if you have me in your sights.</p>
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- 12 There are numerous instances in this poem of the language and theological motifs of Sufism, and it lends itself to a direct comparison with the Persian Sufi canon. The desire for unification with the addressee, whom we infer to be God, pervades the poem. As such, it follows the well-established literary precedent of 'The Song of the Reed' with which Rumi begins his epic *Mathnawi*. In the Song, the reed flute (an instrument frequently used in the Sufi *semah* and especially by Rumi's Mevlevi Order) mourns its separation from the pre-eternal reedbed, as a metaphor for the separation of the human soul from God, who is its source (Mojaddedi 2004: 4).
- 13 Besides the broad articulation in *Yolcuyum* of this Sufic notion of separation and longing for reunion (Arabic: *shawk*), there are also specific instances throughout the poem of Seyfili's use of particular Persian Sufi poetic concepts: in the title itself, the poet's self-referential status as a traveller is typical of many Persian poets, who often use the metaphor of travel or wandering to express the movement of the restless, individual soul;⁷ in verse two, Seyfili mentions a garden and his own role as its gardener, both of which are familiar images in Sufi poetry. The garden of the soul is the metaphorical arena in which the Sufi (as the gardener) cultivates his mystical love, and it is also where the ubiquitous Sufi poetic motif of the nightingale and the rose belong.
- 14 The reference to Majnun and Leyla in verse two, line two – which is the first of many such references in the wider body of Seyfili's work – alludes to the romantic lovers of Nizami Ganjavi's (d. c. 1209) famous poem *Layli va Majnun* (Gelpke 1997; Seyed-Gohrab 2003). Right across the Islamic world, Majnun (which means 'madman') is a popular symbol of the wild lover who loses his mind through years of desperate wandering in the desert in pursuit of Leyla, his earthly beloved. In the Sufi reading of the poem, Leyla the girl is transformed into the Divine Beloved who is the real goal of Majnun's pursuit, and it is his un-realizable longing for union with God which drives him insane until the eventual attainment of that union through his death at the end of the poem.

15 In the final line of verse two, Seyfili implores God to ‘render him a slave’, and offers him permission to sell him as such. The slave relationship with God is well understood in Islam generally, and is a notion substantiated by the Qur’anic text itself. In Sufi thought, the slave relationship between the individual believer and God is particularly important, and moreover it is a slavery that the individual embraces and to which he willingly submits. Nizami’s *Majnun*, for example, makes the following declaration at that stage in the story when his father takes him to be ‘cured’ of his love-madness by praying at the ka’ba in Mecca (Dastgirdi 1378: 335):

In the circle of love I sell my soul; let my ear never be without her earring.⁸

16 The earring that he refers to is that traditionally worn by a slave to denote his or her status, and is a metaphor for his complete submission to the rule of God – as love – over him. Seyfili’s use of the same metaphor in verse two, line four, and the submission of the poetic voice to the status of love’s slave, is resonant with the same mystical Islamic overtones.

17 Verse three of *Yolcuyum* begins with a reference to the ‘soul bird’, another Sufi poetic motif for which the precedent was set by Farid al-Din Attar in his epic poem, *Conference of the Birds* (Darbandi and Davis 1984; Ritter 2003).⁹ The ‘soul bird’ can take a variety of different forms, the most ideal being the nightingale, which is infatuated with the rose, representing the beauty of God. Seyfili’s ‘soul bird’ flies to the high mountains, which represent the troubles of the world and the obstacles which must be overcome in order to attain the longed for union with God, and then descends to ‘spacious gardens’, a descent from which it gains strength because it is there that the love relationship with God can be cultivated.

18 The third line of verse three talks of the ‘trap’s net’, into which the poet has fallen, an image whose juxtaposition with the ‘soul bird’ motif is common in Sufi poetry. This juxtaposition has foundations in Sufi theology, and Annemarie Schimmel finds one of many exemplary precedents for it in Rumi’s *Divan* (Schimmel 1982: 112):

Love appears often as a trap or a net for the soul bird. What bird could or would flee from the grains, sugar, and almonds which are its bait? Indeed:
He who is far away from the net of love
Is a bird that does not have a wing!
[...] The paradox of Love is that man becomes the freer the more he is captured by it, for only thanks to Love will he be able to fly heavenward.¹⁰

19 Being captured by the ‘net of love’ ultimately spells death to the mystic ‘soul bird’, which is a poetic metaphor for the theological doctrine of annihilation (*fana*). This is the final goal of the Sufi mystic, and is to be desired not only for the sake of union with God in itself but also to bring an end to the intense suffering experienced in separation. Thus the trap of the net is one that is paradoxically deliberately sought after by the metaphorical soul bird, and into whose clutches it desires to fall.

20 Accordingly in Seyfili’s poem, in the line following the image of the net (verse three, line four) the poet implores the lover to kill him, an imperative that is repeated in the final couplet of the poem. Death at the hands of the lover (in Persian, *kušta-yi ma’shuq*) is a fate welcomed by many Sufi poets, because of the ensuing title of martyr and guarantee of eternal life which are thought to be thus secured.¹¹ An interesting comparison with Seyfili’s closing couplet in *Yolcuyum* can be made with one of the foundational texts in Persian Sufism, Ahmad Ghazali’s *Sawanih* (Seyed-Gohrab 2003: 127):

Draw an arrow in my name from your quiver
 And place it on your drawn bow;
 If you seek a target, take my heart:
 A mighty shot from you and a joyous sigh from me.¹²

- 21 Seyfili follows Ghazali in using the same imagery of the bow and arrow, and makes the same allusion to willingly placing the target on his heart/soul. Ghazali's 'joyous sigh' emphasizes to the reader that the moment of death is also the moment of longed for union with God.
- 22 It is difficult to find any real evidence in *Yolcuym* of the specifically Alevi identity of its author. Rather, it reads for the most part as a generic example of rural, Turkish, mystical Islamic folk poetry. As his life goes on and his poetry develops, however, Seyfili's use of Sufi motifs becomes demonstrably more innovative and flexible, diverging from the mainstream tradition of Sufi literature and revealing more of his Alevi background.

Sufi Imagery as an Idiom of Alevi Suffering and Persecution

- 23 Since the beginning of the so-called 'Alevi Revival' in the late 1980s, Alevi identity and practice has been undergoing a process of reformulation (Massicard 2005). This publicly reformulated manifestation of Alevilik is distinct in many ways from what might be termed its 'traditional' incarnation. One of the major features of Alevilik that has been emphasized in the revival is its apparently pacifistic nature. This is evidenced by Seyfili's poem *Katlandık* (We Endured), which he wrote in response to the notorious 'mum söndü' allegations.¹³ He explains:

Katlandık is about not becoming like the oppressor. I wrote it on behalf of all the Kızılbaş Alevi when the Sunnis were slandering us with *mum söndü* allegations. My intention was to explain to the Sunnis what we Alevi believe. Each person should carry out his own worship and not worry about the others.

- 24 The verb '*katlanmak*' means to tolerate or to endure, and it is used in the poetic refrain at the end of each verse. It is a noticeably reconciliatory poem, which contains no suggestion of ill-will in response to the slanderous allegations but rather emphasizes the notion – popular since the revival – that Alevilik is a tradition of peace. There are Sufi motifs scattered throughout the poem, primarily in verse one, line one: 'we waited in hope for the beautiful lover'; verse two, line two: 'my flame has not gone out, my fire burns'; and verse three, line three: 'turning the poison into honey, we mixed it with the wine'. However, the closing verse confirms that the subject of the poem is not primarily a mystical one, but rather a plea for tolerance of the Alevi as a religious community:

Seyfili duyulsun figanım zarım	Seyfili, let it be heard, my lament, my anguish
Sevgidir barıştır dostluk ısrarım	My insistence is on love, peace and friendship
Çok bühthanlar sürdü bizlere zalim	The oppressor has slandered us greatly
Pes eyledik acılara katlandık.	We yielded, we endured the pain.

- 25 The Sufi motifs are, then, used in this poem to different effect than in the earlier work. The 'beautiful lover' who is referred to in the first line does not appear to be a reference to God, or even to a human beloved disguised by the language of mysticism, but rather to a generic notion of peace, tolerance and friendship.

- 26 Verse three uses the language of mysticism to allude to the centrality of human reconciliation and peace-making to the *cem* ceremony:

'Hül' deyip cemlerde çerağı yaktık Zehiri bal edip badeye kattık.	Saying 'Hül' in the <i>cems</i> , we lit the candle Turning the poison to honey, we mixed it with wine.
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- 27 *Katlandık* illustrates one of the founding principles of Alevi ritual, which is the restoration and restitution of broken human relationships.¹⁴ The Sufi motifs of honey and wine are used here to express this principle, but their meaning has clearly departed quite considerably from the one implied by the Persian poets.
- 28 *Gardaş* (Brother)¹⁵ is a poem that was written in the 1970s, a decade characterized by serious civil unrest in Turkey and marked by a military coup at its beginning and end. Seyfili often speaks of '12 Mart' (12 March) and '12 Eylül' (12 September), references to the coups on those dates in 1971 and 1980 which he uses as a kind of idiom for that overall period of strife and oppression experienced by the Alevis then, for their participation in the activities of the political left.
- 29 *Gardaş* articulates the difficulties of being an *aşık* during that time, and the repercussions that Seyfili faced at the hands of the authorities for speaking out (as it is incumbent on the *aşık* to do) against the injustice that he perceived was being perpetrated around him. As were many engaged in political activity during that period, he was arrested and imprisoned on various occasions. The first and penultimate stanzas of *Gardaş* are given here:

Engeller önümde, baskı başımda Ozan olmak, aydın olmak zor gardaş Savcılık, adliye, polis peşimde Ozan olmak, şair olmak zor gardaş. Bülbül ahraz olmuş karga önünde Kuzgunlar şahinler karga yanında Cehalet vurur o an damarına Ozan olmak, şair olmak zor gardaş.	Obstacles before me, intimidation from above, Being an <i>ozan</i> 's hard, brother; being enlightened is hard. The prosecutors, the courts, the police are after me It's hard to be an <i>ozan</i> , brother, hard to be a poet. The nightingale's gone silent, there's a crow before him And ravens and hawks beside it. Ignorance strikes him at that moment, in his vein It's hard to be an <i>ozan</i> , brother, hard to be a poet.
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- 30 What is interesting about this poem is Seyfili's use of the mystical nightingale metaphor to talk of political oppression and socio-religious discrimination. The nightingale is no longer located in its traditional role, singing a mournful cry as it seeks the beauty of the rose. Rather, it is defined here by its very silence, and as such appears to have become representative of a new concern which, following on from the references to the 'prosecutors', 'courts', and 'police' is suggestive of the socio-political strife of the time, rather than having any association with its more traditional, mystical aspirations.
- 31 Another poem that contains much of the imagery and language of the Sufi genre, but behind which is an autobiographically inspired sub-text of Alevi suffering and persecution, is *Yüksek Uçma* (Don't Fly High). Seyfili wrote this poem in 1963, and explains the story behind its composition in the following words:

When I was a young man, there were fifty pairs of cranes which would come to our village every year. Cranes are monogamous so they would come in pairs. They were

beautiful, and I am fortunate to have seen them. They would turn the semah over the water of the Euphrates. One day a soldier shot one of the cranes dead with his rifle. We protested to the ağa. Two weeks afterwards, the soldier was hit by a train and he died. The dead crane's partner returned every year with its young, but it never took another partner. When I returned to the village recently, there were only seven pairs of cranes there. The natural environment has changed and so they no longer come.

- 32 The poem is ostensibly an entreaty to the crane not to fly, that it might escape being hit by the soldier's bullet, but there are various different layers of meaning and metaphorical representation involved:

Yüksek uçma telli turnam	Don't fly high, my wiry crane
Yorulursun, yorulursun	You'll grow weary, you'll grow weary.
Bu sevdanın gözü kördür	The eye of this passion is blind
Vurulursun, vurulursun.	You will be hit, you will be hit.
Bir ricam var gülüm sana	I have a request of you, my rose
N'olur uğra Erzincan'a	Please, stop by Erzincan.
Yardan haber getir bana	Bring me news from my lover
Ne olursun, ne olursun.	I implore you, I implore you.
Bana gücenme gel canım	Don't be mad at me, come, my dear
Ovalar senin mekanın	The plains are your home.
Yüksek uçma, tek ısrarım	Don't fly high, it's my one insistence
Yorulursun, yorulursun.	You'll grow weary, you'll grow weary.
Özlem çekersin yarına	You will yearn for tomorrow
Benzersin dertli birine	You'll be like a troubled one.
Benim gibi kaderine	Like me, you'll scold your fate
Darılırsın, darılırsın.	You'll scold your fate.
İçim burkuluyor dertten	My soul is twisted in affliction
Yandım kavruğum hasretten	I have burned, I have been scorched by longing.
Seyfili gibi gurbetten	Like Seyfili, you will be wiped on the floor
Sürünürsün, sürünürsün.	In a place far from home.

- 33 The 'rose' and the 'lover' of verse two, the 'yearning' and the mention of fate in verse four, and the 'burning' and 'scorching by longing' in verse five are all extremely reminiscent of the mystical motifs of the Persian poets, and lend the poem a powerful atmosphere of tragedy and suffering familiar from the Sufi material. Yet it has a sub-text that is very specific to the Alevi case, which is particularly evident in Seyfili's use of the crane as its central subject.
- 34 The crane is a popular motif in Turkish folk poetry generally, but carries special significance to the Alevis, who, like Seyfili in his story, compare its airborne turning to the movement of the *semah*.¹⁶ It is commonly referred to as the '*telli turna*' (wiry crane), an appellation that carries associations of sanctity on account of its proximity to the term '*telli Kuran*' ('the stringed Qur'an', Alevi euphemism for the *saz*), and this sacred association is further emphasized by the Alevis through their likening of its cry to the voice of Ali. The mention made of the monogamous nature of the crane in the story belies Seyfili's reverence for it – and identification with it – because the Alevis generally pride themselves on practicing monogamous marriages, and are often critical of the polygamy sanctioned by other schools of Islam.¹⁷

- 35 In the story that inspired the poem, the crane was brutally shot down and killed by a soldier whose rank and uniform make him representative of the state. The poem thus carries a heavy association of the historic ruptures between the Alevis and official authority. The identification between the poetic voice and the crane becomes stronger as the poem progresses, reaching a climax in verses four and five.
- 36 The language used to express that suffering is profoundly Sufic in its overtones: the image of the individual burning in the fire of affliction (which dominates the final verse of the poem) is very familiar from mystical Persian verse.¹⁸ Seyfili's use of the burning motif here does not seem to be so much inspired by the mystical concept of *dard-i din* (suffering for the sake of God), but rather, in light of the story that he relates as the background to the poem's composition, to be a 'burning' of temporal oppression.
- 37 As well as dealing with the issue of community suffering and oppression, the Sufi idiom also finds expression in Seyfili's poetry that articulates his own very personal experience of pain. He wrote *Dostlar Hey* (Hey Friends) in 1993 following the loss of his leg to amputation, and it expresses the considerable physical pain experienced by the procedure, as well as the accompanying emotional response to encroaching old age (the last line reads, 'the walking stick in his hand, youth has flown away, hey friends.'). It is not primarily a religious poem, and yet it makes significant use of the Sufi idiom.
- 38 Fate, for example, features at the end of the second verse: 'Fate found me and chose me, hey friends'; and verse four is resonant with references to mystical themes:

Sevginin kulu yüm ben turabiyim	I am love's slave, I am <i>turabi</i>
Bir pejmürde kulum ben harabiyim	I am a wretched slave, I am <i>harabi</i>
Aşkın badesiyim ben şarabiyim	I am love's potion, I am its wine
Deli göntül kana kana içti dostlar hey.	This mad soul drank it down, hey friends.

- 39 Turabi and Harabi are both references to *aşıks* from a previous age: Turabi was one of the great Alevi-Bektasi poets of the 19th century, to whom a substantial body of poetry is attributed;¹⁹ Harabi refers to Edip Harabi, an influential *ozan* who died in 1917.²⁰ Both names also hold meanings of their own in the Ottoman-Turkish language, in which *turabi* means 'pertaining to dust or earth', and *harabi* means 'ruin' or 'poverty' (Redhouse 2000: 1191 and 449).²¹
- 40 Seyfili's use of the mystical idiom here does not necessarily imply that the poem has religious concerns. Rather, he uses the emotive language of Sufism to articulate his experience of a particular event that caused him significant physical and emotional distress. In conversation, he is clear that he does not intend the poem to be interpreted through a spiritual or religious lens.

Static Poetic Imagery in the Islamic Tradition

- 41 It is, perhaps, Seyfili's situation within the broad genre of Islamic art that causes him to employ the rather clichéd images of the 'wretched slave' and 'mad soul' in *Dostlar Hey*, for in the broad field of Islamic literature the preservation of tradition is firmly prioritized over the quest for originality of expression. As such, it befalls Seyfili to make use of an established range of symbolism and imagery rather than fashion his

own, and he can safely assume that his readers/listeners will not find it unusual, surprising or even disappointing that he does so.

- 42 Natalie Moyle reaches the same conclusion in her study of the *hikaye* tradition amongst the *aşiks* of the northeastern Anatolian town of Kars, where she observes that, ‘consistent with Islamic aesthetics, certain images are (indeed) used repeatedly’, but that this does not appear to compromise the artistic integrity of the poetry in any way (Moyle 1990: 135).²² Annemarie Schimmel makes the following observation of Islamic folk poetry more generally, and its similarity to the high poetry in this regard (Schimmel 1982: 142):

The folk poets followed the Koranic injunction to find God’s signs “in the earth and in yourselves – do you not see?” (Sura 51/21). In their poetry age-old symbols came to life again. Yet, in the history of mystical folk poetry too the process of repetition and fossilization of forms, topics and images is as visible as in high poetry.

- 43 In *Dostlar Hey*, then, as in much of his poetry, Seyfili appears to be acting very much within the parameters of the mystical Islamic folk tradition, by taking those ‘age-old symbols’ and continuing to use them as poetic metaphors even when they have digressed from their original religious meanings.

Sufi Imagery in the Period of Alevilik’s Fragmentation

- 44 Seyfili’s tendency to use the language of Sufi mysticism when talking of the Alevi community can be seen particularly clearly in the poetry written around 1960, during his early years away from his homeland of Erzincan when he was a migrant worker in Istanbul. These poems express his sadness at the disintegration of the social and ritual institutions of rural Alevilik in the new urban setting.
- 45 The Alevi tradition indeed suffered a great rupture during the early period of mass rural to urban migration in the 1960s and 70s, for historically extremely close-knit Alevi village communities found no recourse to practice their traditions in the anonymous big cities of the Turkish west. With the loss of the closed social structure of the village, the crucial relationships between individuals²³ as well as between *dede* and follower were severely weakened. Seyfili recalls his experience of that era in the following words:

When I first went to Istanbul, I was only a youth. I worked on a construction site in the summers when there was lots of work. I remember on Fridays, all the Sunni workers would go to do their prayers at the mosque at midday, but I had nowhere to go. We didn’t have anywhere to meet, anywhere to practice our *cem*. There was no togetherness, no community.

- 46 Two poems that express Seyfili’s loneliness during this period, and his sadness at the disintegration of Alevilik, are *Yozlaştı* (Degenerated) and *Ayıkılmıyor Başım* (I Can’t Clear My Head). Both poems draw on the language as well as certain broad theological themes of Sufi poetry. The opening lines of *Yozlaştı* are resonant with mystical metaphors:

Aşıklar sevdasız aşklar duygusuz Mecnun’un sahrası, çöle yozlaştı Bülbülün feryadı dillere destan Bahçıvanı gafil, gülü yozlaştı.	Aşiks without passion, love without feeling Majnun’s desert, his plain has degenerated. The legendary cry of the nightingale, The gardener’s been careless, the rose has degenerated.
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- 47 The Sufi image of the careless gardener who has failed to cultivate the rose is used here as a metaphor for the disintegration of Alevilik in the big city. In later verses of the same poem, Seyfili mourns the fact that ‘the seas have been dirtied and the lake debased’, and ‘the honey in the beehive has degenerated’, drawing again on the stock imagery of Persian Sufi poetry to express his sense of loss over the fragmentation of the Alevi community.

The Sufi Idiom Describing the Alevi Community Rather than God

- 48 Seyfili’s use of the Sufi imagery in this context differs from its usage in the comparatively straightforward, religious love poem, *Yolcuyum Yolunda*. In that poem, Seyfili’s poetic voice is situated very much *within* the tradition according to whose poetic norms it speaks. In *Yozlaştı*, however, he has taken a step back from that tradition and begun to use its stock imagery and metaphor to express something different: the idiom of Sufi mysticism is used here to describe the Alevi community itself, rather than the personal relationship between the poet and God, or the ‘lover’, as it does in the classical Persian context.
- 49 This appropriation of Sufi poetic imagery, the language of love-mysticism, to express the demise of his religious community (rather than the unattainability of God) points to the greatly elevated status of the Alevi community and its function in Seyfili’s religious experience. Without the community, there can be no such experience, and the loss of that community is mourned with the same strength of feeling – indeed, the same poetic idiom – as the classical Persian poets lament their separation from God.
- 50 This notion of separation is also powerfully expressed in *Ayıkılmıyor Başım*. This poem laments the fragmentation of the Alevi community in a rather more straightforward idiom, but has at its heart the same powerful motif of separation that is so reminiscent of the Persian material:

Rıza ile lokma yenilmez oldu	The <i>lokma</i> could no longer be eaten with consent
Kırkların Cemine gidilmez oldu	The <i>Cem</i> of the Forty could not be held
Gülbenkler çekilip verilmez oldu	Prayers could not be read, could not be given
Talip ayrı düştü, pir ayrı düştü	The disciple and the <i>pir</i> have parted
Haydar Haydar Haydar, pir ayrı düştü.	Haydar Haydar Haydar, the <i>pir</i> has parted.

- 51 The compound verb used in the refrain, and which occurs a total of ten times in the poem as a whole, is *ayrı düşmek*, meaning ‘to become separated’, the circumstance which is being so strongly lamented in the poem. The *lokma* is a reference to shared food, used primarily in the ritual context of the *cem* to denote the communal meal of sacrificed meat at the end, but also used more broadly in reference to food given and shared amongst the Alevi community. The eating of *lokma* in the *cem* can only take place when everyone in the community has declared *rızalık* (approval, or consent) with one another; that is, when there is peace established within the community. It is the loss of this experience that Seyfili is lamenting here, for in the anonymity of Istanbul in 1959 Alevi migrants such as he became isolated from their communities, *cem* ceremonies could not be held, and *rızalık* could therefore not be established. Seyfili

explained to me the enormous spiritual significance of *rızalık* within the community to the Alevis:

C. Tee: How does an Alevi find forgiveness for his sins? Does God forgive them?

Seyfili: Only the people can be satisfied [*razı*] in the *cem*. Whether or not God has forgiven you is a secret. Neither the *dede* nor anyone else can interfere with this. There is a saying, 'only God knows the heart'. God knows the secrets, and nobody has the right to say they forgive you in God's name. We do not interfere with God's work [*Allah'ın işine karışmayız, biz*].

- 52 The authority of the community, and the importance of good inter-communal relations, is therefore paramount, and so separation from it should consequently be understood to be extremely grave. Its implications far exceed the anticipated realm of loneliness and socio-cultural isolation, and extend to the heart of Seyfili's religious and spiritual experience as an Alevi. He uses the Sufi idiom of spiritual separation from God to articulate his separation from the Alevi community because it is there, in the human community, that he has access to *rızalık*, or forgiveness.

Conclusion

- 53 The use of the language of Sufism in Seyfili's poetry reveals one of the distinctive features of Alevi mysticism, which is the greatly elevated status of the human community therein. This mystical cosmology and worldview was developed over centuries in often isolated and always introverted Alevi communities in rural Anatolia, where the unity and integrity of the community was paramount. Indeed, in the face of Ottoman Sunni hostility, it was a key to the survival and propagation of the tradition.²⁴ In the present day, the situation is very different and most Alevis now live in the demographically mixed and relatively anonymous urban centres in the west of Turkey and Western Europe.
- 54 The so-called modern Alevi movement, which began in the late 1980s, has seen a reawakened interest in Alevi identity in this new environment and, in many cases, a return to ritual practices such as the *cem*. These contemporary *cem* ceremonies – held in new, purpose-built urban *cemevis* – are, however, quite different from their rural prototype: rather than being intimate and highly secretive, they are large in scale and often open to outsiders. The desire for official recognition by the Turkish state and engagement in identity politics has meant that, in many cases, the *cem* has arguably lost some of its 'mystical' function and become a public symbol and even a defense of Alevilik to the outside world.
- 55 It is unclear what will become of Alevi mysticism in this modern, reformulated Alevilik. Altered demographic distribution, together with the processes of codification and institutionalization, has had a profound and inevitable effect on the mystical significance of the community. It should, however, be expected that Alevi *aşiks* such as Ozan Seyfili will continue to use the language of mysticism flexibly and adaptively in their poetry, even as they articulate the myriad new challenges – be they religious, social, legal or political – faced by the Alevis in the 21st century.

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APPENDIXES

Here follow the full Turkish texts of the poems referred to partially in the article, alongside my own English translations. The Turkish texts are given as Seyfili presented them to me and contain occasional inconsistencies in grammar and spelling that reflect his eastern Turkish dialect.

<u>Katlandık</u>	<u>We Endured</u>
Umutla bekledik güzel yarını Düş eyledik acılara katlandık Yaralı gönlü kırık kalpleri Taş eyledik acılara katlandık.	We waited with hope for the beautiful lover We dreamt, we endured the pain With injured souls and broken hearts We hardened ourselves, we endured the pain.
Evveli ne ise dünü bir düşün Sönmedi alevim yanar ateşim Yetmiş iki millet birdir kardeşim Hoş eyledik acılara katlandık.	Whatever was before, think of yesterday My flame has not gone out, my fire burns My brother, the 72 millets ²⁵ are one We were genial, we endured the pain.
Ne fırsat kolladık ne de kin tuttuk 'Hü' deyip cemlerde çerağı yaktık Zehri bal edip badeye kattık Nuş eyledik acılara katlandık.	We neither watched for an opportunity nor did we hold a grudge Saying hü ²⁶ in the cems, we lit the candle Turning the poison to honey we mixed it with wine We drank it, we endured the pain.
Kem söz çıkmaz ehl-i kamil dilinde Arif olan anlar mazlum halinde Dara durduk erenlerin yolunda Cuş eyleyip acılara katlandık.	Evil words are not spoken in the language of ehl-i kamil ²⁷ The wise one understands, in his oppressed state We came to the dar ²⁸ on the road to enlightenment We were ebullient, we endured the pain.
Seyfili duyulsun figanım zarım Sevgidir barıştır dostluk ısrarım Çok bühtanlar sürdü bizlere zalim Pes eyledik acılara katlandık.	Seyfili, let it be heard, my lament, my anguish My insistence is on love, peace and friendship The oppressor has slandered us greatly We yielded, we endured the pain.

<u>Gardaş²⁹</u>	<u>Brother</u>
Engeller önümde, baskı başımda Ozan olmak, aydın olmak zor gardaş	Obstacles before me, intimidation from above, Being an ozan's hard, brother; being enlightened is hard.

Savcılık, adliye, polis peşimde Ozan olmak, şair olmak zor gardaş.	The prosecutors, the courts, the police are after me It's hard to be an <i>ozan</i> , brother, hard to be a poet.
Potansiyel suçlu gibi bakılır Soran yoktur neden yanar yakılır Perişandır üstü başı dökülür Ozan olmak, şair olmak zor gardaş.	Potential is looked on as guilt Nobody asks why he burns, why he's burned His clothing is ragged, he's all down at heel It's hard to be an <i>ozan</i> , brother, hard to be a poet.
Bağlama elinde türkü dilinde O gidiyor Pir Sultan'ın yolunda Ne etseler Ozan memnun halinde Ozan olmak, şair olmak zor gardaş.	His saz in his hand and a folk song on his tongue, He's travelling down Pir Sultan's road Whatever they might do, the <i>ozan</i> 's content to be so It's hard to be an <i>ozan</i> , brother hard to be a poet.
Bülbül ahraz olmuş karga önünde Kuzgunlar şahinler karga yanında Cehalet vurur o an damarına Ozan olmak, şair olmak zor gardaş.	The nightingale's gone silent, there's a crow before him And ravens and hawks beside it. Ignorance strikes him at that moment, in his vein It's hard to be an <i>ozan</i> , brother, hard to be a poet.
Hepsi söz birliği etmişesine Ses veren yok Seyfili'nin sesine Yobazlar dikilmiş tam ensesine Ozan olmak, şair olmak zor gardaş.	They say we speak as one voice But no one speaks out for Seyfili The fanatics have grabbed him by the scruff of his neck It's hard to be an <i>ozan</i> , brother, hard to be a poet.

<i>Dostlar Hey</i>	<i>Hey Friends</i>
Acılı sancılı dertli kederli Bugünüm de böyle geçti dostlar hey. Derdim yetmez başka dertler başıma O vefasız geldi açtı dostlar hey.	Painful, griping, sorrowful, troubled My today has gone like this, hey friends. My cares were not enough, still more have come upon me It came disloyally, causing trouble, hey friends.
Açtırma yarımı hiç bakıp görme Derindedir yaram elini sürme Acı sancı fazla vallahi sorma Kader beni bulup seçti dostlar hey.	Don't have my wound opened, don't look and see My wound is deep, don't touch it It is painful and griping, by God, don't ask Fate found me and chose me, hey friends.
Herşey güzel gidiyordu yolundan Çok pintiyim bir şey gelmez elimden Belli olur duruşumdan halimden İz bıraktık gölge geçtik dostlar hey.	Everything was fine, it was all going well I am so tight-fisted, there's nothing I can do about it It's obvious from my posture, from my state We left a mark and passed into the shadow, hey friends.
Sevginin kuluyum ben turabiyim Bir peçmürde kulum ben harabiyim Aşkım badesiyim ben şarabiyim Deli gönül kana kana içti dostlar hey.	I am love's slave, I am <i>turabi</i> ²⁰ I am a wretched slave, I am <i>harabi</i> ²¹ I am love's potion, I am its wine My mad soul drank it bleeding, bleeding, hey friends.
Seyfili kendini böyle yargılar Sökülmüş yaralar düşmüş sargılar	Seyfili judges himself thus Wounds unstitched and bandages askew

Bazen ağlar bazen haline güler Baston elde gençlik uçtu dostlar hey.	Sometimes he cries, sometimes he laughs at his state The walking stick in his hand, youth has flown away, hey friends.
(1993, Antalya)	

<u>Yozlaştı</u>	<u>Degenerated</u>
Aşıklar sevdasız aşklar duygusuz Mecnun'un sahrası çölü yozlaştı. Bülbülün feryadı dillere destan Bahçıvanı gafil gülü yozlaştı.	Aşıks without passion, love without feeling Majnun's desert, his plain has degenerated. The legendary cry of the nightingale, The gardener's been careless, the rose has degenerated.
Ne edep ne erkan nerede ikrar Beyhude ağlamak ne işe yarar Her nereye baksan bir tahribat var Talip pire dargın yolu yozlaştı.	Neither rules nor etiquette, where is the confession Crying is futile for what does it do? Wherever you look there's destruction The road from follower to pir is angry and degenerated.
Dünyaya bakmayız dar pencereden Kurtulmak gerekir bu cendereden Bu mülkün sahibi şahı nereden Deryalar kirlendi gölü yozlaştı.	We do not see the world through a narrow window We need to be saved from this mangle From whence did the owner, the king of this world come The seas have been dirtied and the lake debased.
Seyfili gözlerim alınsın gala Her şey tam bitmedi biraz var hala Zorla dayatırlar hep bile bile Arının kovanda balı yozlaştı.	Seyfili let my eyes remain true Not everything is quite gone, there is hope still Though our hands are forced And the honey in the beehive has degenerated.

<u>Ayıkmıyor Başım</u>	<u>I Can't Clear My Head</u>
Ayıkmıyor başım kederden dertten Fıgan ayrı düştü, zar ayrı düştü Yolumu şaşırdım borandan, kıştan Dolu ayrı vurdu kar ayrı düştü Haydar Haydar Haydar kar ayrı düştü.	I can't clear my head, from grief and from pain The plaint and the die have fallen awry. I lost my way in the thunderstorm and the winter The hail and the snow have parted Haydar, Haydar, Haydar, the snow has parted. ³²
Rıza ile lokma yenilmez oldu Kırkların cemine gidilmez oldu Gülbenkler çekilip verilmez oldu Talip ayrı düştü, pir ayrı düştü Haydar Haydar Haydar pir ayrı düştü.	The <i>lokma</i> could no longer be eaten with consent The <i>Cem</i> of the Forty could not be held. Prayers could not be read, could not be given The disciple and the <i>pir</i> have parted Haydar, Haydar, Haydar, the <i>pir</i> has parted.
Seyfili bir sevda bu yolu sürmek Demirden leblebi, ateşten gömlek Özveri gerekir Nesimi olmak Mansur ayrı düştü, dar ayrı düştü Haydar Haydar Haydar dar ayrı düştü.	Seyfili, following this path is a passion Chickpeas of iron, shirt of fire To be Nesimi, sacrifice is required Mansur and his hard times have parted. Haydar, Haydar, Haydar the hard times have parted.
(1959, İstanbul)	

NOTES

1. The three major didactic poets are Shah Hata'i, Pir Sultan Abdal and Kul Himmet, although different Alevi traditions appear to emphasize different poets.
2. The author carried out fieldwork interviews with Ozan Seyfili at his home near Antalya between September 2009 and May 2010.
3. Not all Alevi *aşık*s are of *dede* lineage, and not all *dedes* sing and play the *saz*. If this is the case then an *aşık* (sometimes, 'zakir') will accompany him and provide musical direction in the *cem*.
4. Many Alevi communities suffered intense periodic persecution under the Ottoman Sultans (Imber 1979). They also suffered a number of violent massacres in the 20th century, most significantly in the Dersim region in the 1930s and the towns of Kahramanmaraş, Çorum and Sivas in the 1970s and 90s.
5. These observations are made with an awareness that certain aspects of (historical) Alevilik are being emphasized more than others in the context of its contemporary reformulation and transformation.
6. English translations of the poems are by the author. The full texts of each poem cited in the article are given, with translation, in the Appendix below.
7. This concept is most clearly seen in the progression through the different stages of the Sufi path. (Ernst in Lewisohn 1999: 435-455).
8. Persian to English translation by the author, with acknowledgement to Dr. Leonard Lewisohn.
9. In this Sufi allegorical tale, thirty birds (individual souls) are guided by the hoopoe (the *pir*) towards the mystical Simurgh, who represents God. At the end of the journey, and by way of a clever linguistic pun, the thirty birds realize that the Simurgh (literally, 'thirty birds') is in fact no more than the sum of their own existence, an important point of Sufi doctrine - one with pantheistic implications - as regards the existence of God through creation rather than in transcendence over it.
10. Quoting the *Divan* of Rumi, 721/7577.
11. Hafiz addresses his beloved directly with the words, 'To die by the stroke of your blade is life eternal.' (Ghazal CCCLV, line 11, in Avery and Heath-Stubbs 1952: 63) For more on *kushta-yi ma'shuq*, see the discussion in Seyed-Gohrab 2003: 129-136.
12. Quoted and translated from the Persian by Seyed-Gohrab.
13. The *mum söndü* allegation is that the Alevi *cem* ceremony - in which men and women participate together - culminates in the candles being extinguished, and in sexual orgy. *Mum söndü* is a historic accusation directed at Kızılbaş-Alevi as well as other 'heretical' minority groups. For an Alevi response to recent allegations, see Yaman 2007: 91-95.
14. The *cem* cannot commence until all members of the assembly have declared that they are at peace (*rıza*) with one another and bear no grudges. If any are declared to exist, they must be resolved at this point by the presiding *dede*.
15. The correct spelling of the word for brother is with a 'k' and an 'e': *kardeş*. Seyfili's spelling and the pronunciation calls to mind the rural dialects of eastern Anatolia.
16. The *semah* is the rotational ritual dance with which the *cem* ceremony culminates. There is a particular *semah* that is named after the crane, the *Turna Semahı*.
17. Polygamy was outlawed by the Turkish Republic but remains permissible under the Islamic shari'a, which is the point of comparison often made by the Alevis.
18. It is often found in partnership with the image of the moth (the mystical soul) that is irresistibly drawn to the flame (God) but will inevitably immolate itself in its heat when it achieves the desired union.
19. Cahit Öztelli reports that Turabi was the *dedebaba* (head of the Bektaşî Sufi order) at the convent in Hacibektaş in 1849, and that he died in 1868. He considers him a valuable Bektaşî poet (Öztelli 1973: 371). For Turabi's collection of poetry, see *Turabi (Ali Dedebaba) Divan* 1294 AH.

20. Edip Harabi is the author of the *Vahdetname*, a long poem outlining Alevi creation mythology.
21. Ebu Turab (Father of the Earth) is also one of the titles given to Ali in Alevilik.
22. For more on innovation and originality in Turkish folk music, see Markoff 1991:129-145, especially pp.136-7.
23. In Alevi society, each male individual or married couple is joined to another by way of a ritual pledge of lifelong attachment, known as *musahiplik*. The bond between two *musahips* is considered to be closer than that of blood brothers.
24. Altan Gökalp suggests that mysticism served as both religious legitimization and a form of social control in small-scale rural Alevi communities (Gökalp 1980: 175-178).
25. *Millet* means nation; in Ottoman usage it referred to the religious groups (broadly: Muslim; Jewish; Greek Orthodox; Armenian; Assyrian) according to which the Empire was organised.
26. 'Hü' does not have an easy translation. It is the Arabic term for 'he' (ie, God). The word is used in the course of the *cem* – at the instigation of the *dede*, although it is repeated by the assembly - with an imperative sense of sitting up and paying attention.
27. The sacred people, ie the Alevis.
28. Lit. 'narrow', denoting the place of ritual examination during particular *cem* ceremonies.
29. The correct spelling is *kardeş*. Seyfili's use of the 'G' and the 'a' here are evocative of the eastern Anatolian rural dialect.
30. Pertaining to dust.
31. Ruin, or poverty.
32. Haydar is a name used by the Alevis for Ali.

ABSTRACTS

The Alevi tradition in Turkey is characterized by a profoundly mystical religious worldview. Its poetic culture, *aşıklık*, is heavily influenced by the language and mystical motifs of Persian Sufism. Yet whilst the major precepts of Sufi theology and ritual practice undeniably constitute an important influence on Alevilik, there are areas of its mysticism that are uniquely Alevi. This paper explores the particularities of Alevi mysticism by analyzing the context and meaning of the Sufi poetic idiom in Alevi poetry. The subject is approached through an ethnographic study of the life and poetry of a contemporary Alevi *aşık* from Erzincan, called Ozan Seyfili, the span of whose life covers the past six decades. It concludes by considering the future prospects for Alevi mysticism as the community codifies and reformulates its traditions in the present day.

INDEX

Keywords: Alevi, mysticism, aşık poetry, community, migration, persecution

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