



**The Role of Female Minstrels in the
Transmission of Alevi Ritual Knowledge:
Two Female *Âşıks* from Kısas-Urfa, Turkey**

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Abstract

In this paper, I consider a variety of issues in exploring the transformation and innovation of knowledge in Alevi women's poetry in the following selected examples on two female minstrels from Urfa- Kısas, Turkey. As the critical perspectives of feminism had already knocked the door of social sciences and literature, I regard the notion of a female *âşık* (minstrel) at the crossroads of gender, genre, and nationalism. I particularly examine the socio-historical, political, and cultural contexts in which the female *âşıks* have emerged and investigate the creative and innovative ways in which they sustain their art. I have two exemplary female *âşıks* from Kısas (Urfa), Hürü Aşan and Emine Uğur, both of whom claim to be performers of *âşık* literature. I aim to show the continuities and discrepancies in the process of transmission of religious and ritual

traditions, as well as everyday practices, through their life histories, poetry and performances.

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1. Introduction¹

On a hot day in May, 2006, I conducted an interview with Hürü Aşan, a female Alevi minstrel from Urfa, in the cool courtyard of a converted Ottoman mansion. Relaxing under the silent canopy of an acacia tree, we sipped hot tea from tiny glasses as I started asking questions about her life and her art. Later on, I visited her at her home in the city centre, as well as at her daughter's house, and we walked together through the ancient streets of the city, as she told me chapters from her life. On another occasion, I visited her home village in Kısas. All the time, our conversations focused on her family, her poetry, and her performances. In May of 2006, I also conducted a series of interviews in Mersin with Emine Uğur, another female *âşık* who originally comes from Kısas and migrated to Mersin. I spent time listening to what is alluded to as the “burning” quality of Emine's voice, a metaphor which alludes to the intensity of the emotions expressed in her songs.

All of my interactions with these women took place in the broader context of my personal and academic interest in researching the poetry of the *âşık* tradition. In light of its role as the outstanding genre in the field of Turkish folklore, the paucity of studies on female artists within the *âşık* tradition is surprising. The female *âşiks* seem only to be broadly “known” about, with the exception of a few recent studies that have focused particularly on their art². Since the

1 I would like to thank my life companion, Erdoğan Gedik, for his attentive reading and helpful comments.

2 Cf. Kurt Reinhard, “Bemerkungen zu den Âşık, den Volkssängerin der Türkei”, *Asian Music* 6.1/2 (1975), 189–206; Ursula Reinhard & Max Peter Bauman, “Şah Turna: Zum Liedrepertoire einer zeitgenössischen Âşık-Sängerin”, Max Peter Baumann (ed.), *Musik der Türken in Deutschland*, Kassel: Landeck, 1985, 62–94; Kemal Hayrettin Akdemir & Werner Schiffauer, “Şah Turna: Zur Rezeption und Weiterentwicklung der Âşık-Musik im politischen Lied”, Max Peter Baumann (ed.), *Musik der Türken in Deutschland*, Kassel: Landeck, 1985, 44–61; Meryem Tatıl, *Günümüz Âşıklık Geleneği İçerisinde İki Kadın Âşık: Arzu Bacı ve Ayşe Çağlayan*, unpublished M.A. Thesis, Ankara: Hacettepe University Department of Turkish Language and Literature, 1995 and Jennifer

eighteenth century, women *âşiks* (like their male counterparts) have relied upon oral transmission for the creation and performance of their poetry. That poetry has been of a type generally recognized as belonging to a male tradition, and the women *âşiks*, whilst entering into this tradition, have nonetheless often performed their poetry in a manner opposed to traditional norms. Today, a number of female *âşiks* are “officially registered” by the Turkish Ministry of Culture and they continue to perform in public

In the following, I explore the transformation and innovation in Alevi women’s poetry, and in so doing, I will consider a variety of relevant issues. I will examine the place of the female *âşik* at the crossroads of gender, genre and nationalism, and consider this juxtaposition in light of recent feminist dialogue in the social sciences and literary studies. Thus, I will examine the socio-historical, political, and cultural contexts in which the female *âşiks* have emerged, and investigate their creative and innovative ways of sustaining their art. After introducing the figure of *âşik* and the wider *âşik* tradition, I will examine the changing contexts of that tradition, including the influence exerted on it by modern technology, as well as the role played by the Turkish state in *âşik* festivals. More importantly, I will examine the individual lives of two female minstrels, and consider the evidence of innovation and creativity, which is visible in the very tactics that they have employed in order to attain to the status of *âşik*. Using my two exemplary female *âşiks* from Kısas-Urfa, Hürü Aşan and Emine Uğur, I will show the way in which they adhere to, as well as the diverge from, tradition in the process of their transmission of religious, ritual and everyday practices, and I will do this through a study of their life histories, poetry and performances.

2. *The Âşık and the Âşık Tradition*

The word *âşik* originally comes from Arabic and it loosely translates into English as “lover”. It is also the Turkish name used for a folk minstrel who composes and sings folk songs, mostly known for their performances of *hikâye*

Petzen, *Turkish Women Poet-Singers: Negotiation of Gender and Genre*, unpublished M.A. Thesis, Bloomington [Ind.] 2000.

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(prose narrative) in Anatolia. Folklorist İlhan Başgöz describes the *hikâye* in Turkish folklore thus:

“*Hikâye* is a Turkish folk narrative form which cannot properly be included in any folk narrative classification system presently used by western scholars [...] though prose narrative is dominant in a *hikâye*, it also contains several folk songs. These songs [...]—love songs, ritual songs, laments, heroic songs—may number more than one hundreds in a single *hikâye*, each one having three, five or more stanzas.”³

Certain different genres of *hikâye*, particularly those that deal with epic heroism and romantic love, have traditionally been considered the most revered examples of Turkish folk poetry. *Hikâye* has served as something of an emblem of the folk *canon* (emphasis added) established by folklore scholars, implying one of the usages of “tradition” similar to the definition given by Dan Ben-Amos⁴. In other words, many folklore classifications handled the genre as the chief form of the Turkish orality. As such, the *âşık* is held to be the prominent figure in both the composition and transmission of folk poetry, and several studies on the *âşık* have been carried out with this idea in mind.

Early scholars, such as literary critic Mehmed Fuad Köprülü, point to the Central Asian origins of the *âşık*⁵. According to Köprülü, the *âşık* tradition has been influenced both by heterodox Alevism, and by pre-Islamic, Central Asian shamanism. Since his time, other studies have focused on the historical emergence of the *âşık* genre⁶;

3 İlhan Başgöz, “Turkish *Hikâye*—telling Tradition in Azerbaijan, Iran”, *Journal of American Folklore* 83/330 (1970), 391–405.

4 Dan Ben-Amos, “The Seven Strands of Tradition: Varieties in its Meaning in American Folklore Studies”, *Journal of Folklore Research* 21.2–3 (1984), 97–131.

5 Cf. Fuad Köprülü, “Ozan”, *Edebiyat Araştırmaları I*, (Kaynak Eserler Dizisi), İstanbul: Akçağ 1999 [1915], 131–144 and *ibid.*, “Saz Şairleri, Dün ve Bugün”, *Edebiyat Araştırmaları I*, (Kaynak Eserler Dizisi), İstanbul: Akçağ 1999 [1915], 165–193.

6 Cf. Pertev Naili Boratav, “L’*épopée* et la ‘*hikâye*’”, Jean Deny et al. (eds.), *Philologiae Turcicae Fundamenta*, vol. II, Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1964, 11–44 and Pertev Naili Boratav, “La littérature des ‘*aşiq*’”, Jean Deny et al. (eds.), *Philologiae Turcicae Fundamenta*, vol. II, Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1964, 129–147.

on the life of the *âşık*, and his performance and digression; the *âşık* figure in neighbouring cultures to Turkey⁷; the importance of the dream motif in the process of becoming an *âşık*⁸; *âşık* performances in the light of social and cultural change⁹; *âşık* repertoire and contests¹⁰; and, finally, a comprehensive study on the performers of romantic *âşık* poetry¹¹. As these researchers point out, the parallels between the examples of *hikâye* and the character of the *âşık* can be traced back to the seventeenth, and according to some scholars¹², the sixteenth century. Prominent folklorist Pertev Naili Boratav's seminal work¹³ considered the position of the *âşık* in the *hikâye* tradition and examined the evidence for overlap between the two genres. İlhan Başgöz has also underlined the importance of the *âşık* in the eastern tradition, as well as the relevance of life histories to an accurate understanding of the tradition¹⁴.

In exploring the performance and the performer of minstrelsy, and therefore the notion of transmission, one of

7 Cf. İlhan Başgöz, "From Gosan to Ozan", *Turcica* 33 (2002), 229–236; *ibid.*, "Love Themes in Turkish Folk Poetry", *ibid.*, *Turkish Folklore and Oral Literature: Selected Essays of İlhan Başgöz*, ed. Kemal Silay, (Indiana University Turkish Studies Series; 19), Bloomington [Ind.]: Indiana University Press, 1998 [1972], 53–75; *ibid.*, "Digression in Oral Narrative: A Case Study of Individual Remarks by Turkish Romance Tellers", *Journal of American Folklore* 99/391 (1986), 5–23; *ibid.*, "The Tale Singer and his Audience", Dan Ben-Amos & Kenneth S. Goldstein (eds), *Folklore, Performance and Communication*, (Approaches to Semiotics; 40), The Hague: Mouton, 1975, 142–202 and *ibid.*, "Turkish *Hikâye*-telling Tradition in Azerbaijan".

8 Cf. Boratav, "L'éopée et la 'hikâye'"; *ibid.*, "La littérature des 'aşık'"; İlhan Başgöz, "Dream Motif in Turkish Folk Stories and Shamanistic Initiation", *Asian Folklore Studies* 26.1 (1967), 1–18 and Umay Günay, *Âşık Tarzı Şiir Geleneği ve Rüya Motifi*, (Atatürk Kültür Merkezi Yayını; 16), Ankara: Atatürk Kültür Merkezi, 1986.

9 Cf. Özkul Çobanoğlu, *Âşık Tarzı Kültür Geleneği ve Destan Türü*, (Akçağ Yayınları; 316), Ankara: Akçağ, 2000.

10 Cf. Yıldırım Erdener, *The Song Contests of Turkish Minstrels: Improvised Poetry Sung to Traditional Music*, (Millman Parry Studies in Oral Tradition), New York [NY] et al.: Garland, 1995.

11 Cf. İlhan Başgöz, *Hikâye: Turkish Folk Romance as Performance Art*, (Special Publications of the Folklore Institute; 7), Bloomington [Ind.]: Indiana University Press, 2008.

12 Cf. Köprülü, "Ozan".

13 Cf. Pertev Naili Boratav, *Halk Hikayeleri ve Halk Hikayeciliği*, Istanbul: Adam, 1988 [1946].

14 Cf. İlhan Başgöz, "Turkish Folk Stories about the Lives of the Minstrels", *Journal of American Folklore* 65/258 (1952), 331–340.

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the most important aspects is the ways in which the minstrel becomes an *âşık*. Widely considered as the “mythical narrative” within the genre of Turkish folk poetry, the path to becoming an *âşık* is thought to involve the reception (usually in a dream) of a “love potion” by the performer/singer from the hands of either a beautiful woman or a “*pir*”, (religious leader), which, upon consumption, drives the *âşık* to insanity. Thereupon, the *âşık* embarks on his quest for the beloved, a quest which will lead him on a lifelong journey in pursuit of respite from the burning sensation of his mystical love. Boratav and Başgöz note that the “dream motif” is the most important factor identified with the role of the minstrel. They observe that it can also be seen in Native American cultures, and that its roots can be traced back to shamanistic practices. It is, however, only in Anatolian culture where the “love potion” motif and the image of woman are joined together¹⁵. Başgöz’s remarks on the dream motif are particularly significant, and call for further investigation. It is his assertion that “the dream takes place when the hero is at the age of puberty”, and that “the dream always comes after a moral or physical ordeal; it is induced by the desperation and disappointment of the hero”:

“If the dream does not follow such an ordeal, it comes after the hero prays to God to free him from his trouble. In most instances, the dream takes place at a holy site. Graves and fountains are two most common settings for the dream.”¹⁶

Recently, Mehmet Yardımcı had classified the different ways of becoming an *âşık* and has identified two important elements in *âşık* initiation¹⁷: firstly, the learning processes of what is known as the “master-novice” relationship, and secondly, the drinking of the love potion. Both of these elements seem to be necessary on the journey to becoming an *âşık*. Yardımcı presents several “versions” within the motif of “falling in love” by examining the identities of the

15 Cf. Boratav, “La littérature des ‘aşiq’” and Başgöz, “Dream Motif”.

16 Cf. Başgöz, “Dream Motif”, 4.

17 Cf. Mehmet Yardımcı, “Âşık Edebiyatında Rüya Sonrası Âşık Olma (Bade İçme)”, <http://turkoloji.cu.edu.tr/ HALK% 20 EDEBIYATI/26.php> (2nd March 2006).

possible bestowers of the “love potion”: a religious figure, a woman, or another *âşık*. He also considers the significance, in some case, of food, drink and other consumable items: water, wine, an apple, a piece of paper, and bread. According to Yardımcı, who follows Başgöz, whatever the content of the “love potion” may be, and whoever its giver, its function does not change¹⁸.

These scholars talk about becoming an *âşık* always from the view-point of the *male* performers, although there had been no female performers of poetry in this tradition. I argue that the male bias in these studies have shaped both the scholarly examination of the *âşık* poetry and labeling it the “chief” form of Turkish verbal art. Furthermore, the male bias also did not explore the other possibilities—other creative narratives of the performers through which they could attain professionalism. In the course of my own research, however, I encountered multifarious narratives of women “becoming an *âşık*” in a variety of different ways, something which is, in my opinion, a reflection of the creativity and innovation of these female *âşıks* both in maintaining and passing on religious knowledge. I shall develop this observation in more detail below.

The attitudes of wider Turkish society towards the *âşık* are complex and multi-faceted. Firstly, and in spite of the fact that their role far exceeds the parameters of this definition, they are commonly viewed as “entertainers”. Furthermore, most *âşıks* are widely perceived as being emotionally unstable (a perception derived from the so-called destabilising effects of the imbibed love potion), and this has contributed to the development of the popular image of the *âşık* as socially marginalised. This point is especially important, as most *âşıks* have traditionally maintained other jobs in order to make a living, and to supplement the tips they receive for their performances. This image of the *âşık* has survived until today.

Although there might be different opinions as to what represents an *âşık*, it is the ability to compose poetry which is considered by many academics, as well as most *âşıks* themselves, to be of primary importance, while the *bağlama* (or *saz*) performance is thought to be secondary. For this reason, a distinction is made between the two with the terms *dilli âşık* (minstrels with the ability to compose; literally “*âşıks* who have the tongue”) and *telli âşık* (minstrels with

18 Cf. Başgöz, “Dream Motif”.

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the musical ability to play the *saz*, the long-neck lute; literally “*âşiks* with strings”) ¹⁹.

Before I move on to a discussion of the female minstrels, I would like to clarify a few points on the subject of male *âşiks* and the role of Alevism in the continuity of *âşık* poetry. As several studies have underlined, most *âşiks* come from an Alevi background. For an *âşık*, both composing and playing are considered as the foundational elements of their folk tradition. The *saz* is the singer-poet’s companion, a vehicle through which one can express one’s own feelings.²⁰ Often times, parallels had been drawn between *saz* and Alevism, because of the central role of *saz* in the Alevi rituals. The role of the *saz* is especially important in light of the fact that the transmission of religious and everyday knowledge is based on orality, both in Alevism and in folk literature²¹. Most Turkish folk-poets—according to certain sources, 90%—are Alevis²². The importance of music, ritual singing and playing becomes all the more evident when one considers the *semâh* performed at the *cem* (the religious ritual of the Alevis, where women, men and children worship together). Characterized by turning and swirling, and at times by circumambulation, and accompanied by the *saz*, the *semah* ‘whirlers’ maintain utmost respect for the *pir*, the religious

19 Cf. Jennifer Petzen, “Turkish Women Poet-Singers”.

20 The *saz* is an important companion to the *âşık*. Âşık Veysel, for example, in one of his poems, impersonates the *saz*, talking to it and advising it (Ben Gidersem Sazım Sen Kal Dünyada/If I pass away, you shall stay in this world, my *saz*). There is also a telling story in circulation on this subject about Seyyid Rıza, an Alevi *pîr*, who was himself a *saz*-maker. According to tradition, after he finished the making of each *saz*, he would add the strings to it, and the people watching assumed that he would play it right away. Instead, he would hold the *saz* up, and drop it on the floor, whereupon it would develop a crack. Seyyid Rıza would then put it back together and play it. On being asked why he had done this, he would reply: “As a wounded person sighs from the heart, a cracked *saz* sings deeply”, showing that the *saz* is not only seen as a companion to the *âşık*, but it is also considered to have certain human qualities. Furthermore, it is clear that when an emotion is expressed from the heart, it evidently carries weight. There are many more examples of this, but I thank Erdoğan Gedik for sharing this particular story with me.

21 Cf. Abdülbaki Gölpınarlı, *Alevi-Bektaşî Nefesleri*, İstanbul: İnkılâp, 1992 [1963].

22 Cf. Gloria Clarke, “Alevi Kültürel Kimliğinde Müziğin Rolü”, *Toplumbilim* 12 (2001), 127–136: 128.

leader. Religious poetry, or *deyiş*²³, is also sung at the ceremonies, and gives advice to the congregation whilst remembering the important saints of Alevi history. Therefore, neither the poetry nor the ritual dance can correctly be considered as art forms for entertainment's sake. By assuming a very particular form and function, both *deyiş* and *semâh* become tools of transmission of religious knowledge, most especially in the context of the *cem*.

On the subject of the central position of the *âşık* in the Alevi tradition, several scholars of folklore and literature have attempted to show the link between Alevi beliefs and the shamanist practices of Central Asia. This was an attitude promulgated by the official ideology of the Turkish Republic. Karin Vorhoff considers various studies on Alevism and the Alevis since Köprülü's pioneering work, noting that instead of approaching Alevism-Bektashism in terms of its syncretism, most researchers have focused heavily on the "Turkish" elements within it²⁴. French scholars especially (and other scholars living in France) have emphasized the Turkish character of Alevism²⁵ by tracing its origins to Central Asian shamans and shamanism²⁶. These elements of Alevism have been used in the formation of the secular state, aiming to establish a "Turkish" culture as the basis of the new nation-state's identity. In the earlier phases of the newly-founded secular Turkish Republic, it seemed more logical to assert that the Turkish tribes carried their "pure" Central Asian identity

23 Cf. Abdülbaki Gölpınarlı, *Türk Tasavvuf Şiiri Antolojisi: Tasavvufî-Zühdî Edebiyat, Melâmî-Hamzavî Halk Edebiyatı, Alevî-Bektaşî Edebiyatı*, İstanbul: İnkılâp, 2004 [1972].

24 Cf. Karin Vorhoff, "Türkiye'de Alevilik ve Bektaşilikle İlgili Akademik ve Gazetecilik Nitelikli Yayınlar", Tord Olsson et. al. (eds.), *Alevi Kimliği*, Trans. Bilge Kurt Torun & Hayati Torun, (Türkiye Araştırmaları Dizisi), İstanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, 1999, 32–66: 35.

25 Cf. Irène Mélikoff, *Sur les traces du soufisme turc: Recherches sur l'islam populaire en Anatolie*, (Analecta İsisiana; 3), İstanbul: İsis, 1992; Altan Gökalp, "Religion et traditions populaires en Turquie", André Akoun (ed.), *Le monothéisme: Mythes et traditions*, (Mythes et croyances du monde entier; 2), Turnhout et al.: Brepols, 1990, 400–413; *ibid.*, "Alevisme nomade: Des communautés de statut à l'identité communautaire", Peter A. Andrews (ed.), *Ethnic Groups in the Republic of Turkey*, (Beihefte zum Tübinger Atlas des Vorderen Orients, Reihe B; 60), Wiesbaden: Reichert, 1989, 524–537 and *ibid.*, *Têtes rouges et bouches noires: Une confrérie tribale de l'ouest anatolien*, Paris: Soc. d'Ethnographie, 1980.

26 Cf. Vorhoff, "Akademik ve Gazetecilik Nitelikli Yayınlar", 37.

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into Anatolia, rather than to develop a theory of acculturation to Byzantine, Kurdish, or Arab cultures. As this approach also emphasized “authenticity,” the *âşiks* were understood within a continuum of the *ozan*²⁷ tradition of Central Asia²⁸. However, Başgöz’s fairly recent study shows that there are more similarities between the *âşik* and the Parthian *gosan* than between the *âşik* and the Central Asian *ozan*, and he posits that because no reference to the *ozan* among the Turks exists before the eleventh century, the word is likely to derive from the Persian *gosan*²⁹.

While the Alevis have contributed to Turkish folk culture a great deal, interestingly, they have been also subjected to various degrees of abuse by both the Ottomans and the Turkish State, including, at times, systematic oppression and exclusion³⁰. Yet one of the strategies of the Republican regime also involved using the Alevis as a kind of “social glue”, especially in the formative years of the Turkish Republic. Markus Dreßler summarizes the state of Alevism in the following way:

“It is due to their unhappy relationship with the Ottomans that the Alevis had sympathy for the abolition of the Sultanate in 1922 and the Caliphate in 1924, the two central institutions symbolizing and legitimizing Ottoman political and religious power. Modern Alevi interpretations of the Turkish war of independence (1919-

27 *Ozan* means “bard”, and, according to Fuad Köprülü, is the embodiment of a shamanistic character who performs tasks both sacred and profane.

28 Cf. Köprülü, “Ozan”.

29 Cf. Başgöz, “From Gosan to Ozan”.

30 Alevi massacres started in Ottoman times and have continued into the era of the Turkish Republic. Alevis today still remember Ottoman Sultan Selim the Grim ordering the slaughter of nearly 40,000 Alevis in 1514. In 1920, the Koçgiri uprising of the Kurdish Alevis was suppressed by the killing of thousands of people. In 1937-38, there was a massacre of the Alevis in Dersim. Several Alevis were killed in 1978 in Maraş and in 1980 in Çorum. In 1993, 35 people, most of whom were intellectual leaders and Alevi poets, were burnt to death in Sivas, in the Madımak Hotel. In 1995 again, there were several killings in Gazi and Ümraniye, two neighbourhoods of Istanbul which are home to Alevi and Kurdish migrant populations.

1921) stress the Alevi support for Mustafa Kemal, later Atatürk.”³¹

The bias in modern Turkey against the Alevis is due in large part to their misrepresentation, the precedent for which, according to Peter Bumke, was set by the (usually Sunni) informants of the early researchers. The information which they offered focused on the absence of mosques, ritual ablution and prayer among the Alevis, and was accentuated by the rumours of incestuous sexual practices which the Alevis were believed to take part in. In turn, the secretive nature of Alevi worship made it next to impossible to discern fact from fiction³².

While societal and political factors, both in Ottoman times and during the Republican regime, continued to influence negative perceptions of Alevism in wider Sunni society, the Alevis were nonetheless perceived as representatives of the *âşık* poetic tradition, which was, and to a degree still is, considered as the foundation of Turkish folklore. The state’s highlighting of the role of the Alevis as the true transmitters of Turkish culture has been furthered by the “re-invention” of the *âşık* tradition in the context of “secondary orality”³³. Nonetheless, the Alevis and Alevi poetry’s relationship to political ideology has continuously shifted between the right wing, which tends to promote a nationalist manifesto, and the left, which tends to uphold socialist principles. Both, at different times, have found expression through the protest voice of Alevi poetry and song.

3. Re-Inventing the Âşık Tradition: Changing Historical Contexts and the Impact of Secondary Orality

31 Markus Dreßler, “Turkish Alevi Poetry in the Twentieth Century: The Fusion of Political and Religious Identities”, *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 23 (2003), 109–154: 113.

32 Cf. Peter J. Bumke, “The Kurdish Alevis: Boundaries and Perceptions”, Peter A. Andrews (ed.), *Ethnic Groups in the Republic of Turkey*, (Beihefte zum Tübinger Atlas des Vorderen Orients, Reihe B; 60), Wiesbaden: Reichert, 1989, 510–518: 510.

33 Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, (New Accents), London et al.: Methuen, 1988 [1982].

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The *âşiks*, both as narrators and as composers, take upon themselves an important task: they not only sing their own poems, but they also incorporate into them the tradition of the previous *âşiks* that has been passed down to them. Boratav describes the “natural” context of the *âşiks* in the following way:

“Pour leurs créations et pour l’exercice de leur métier, ces artistes ont trouvé un terrain particulièrement propice dans les milieux ruraux, dans ceux des petites villes peu influencées par la littérature classique, et chez les populations nomades et semi-nomades. Dans les grands centres culturels, ils ont été plutôt attirés par la littérature classique, qu’ils ont voulu imiter, et ils n’ont pu garder les caractéristiques de leur art propre.”³⁴

Influenced by patterns of cultural, political, and societal change in Turkey, the *âşik* tradition is no longer maintained in the manner which Boratav describes above, but in the context of “secondary orality,” which is facilitated by continuity and change simultaneously. At the dawn of the technological age and, with it, the arrival of modern methods of communication (the printed word, radio, television, cassettes, CDs and, lately, the internet), oral cultures had already begun to assimilate different aspects of popular and folk culture. Folk poetry continues to be produced, performed, and consumed in a context which Walter Ong calls “secondary orality”, a concept which points to the differences between primary oral cultures, i.e., those that do not have a system of writing, and chirographic cultures, which are based on the written word. The shift from an oral-based stage of consciousness to one dominated by writing and print significantly impacts the way human beings think. Ong pinpoints the fundamental differences between these two types of culture, and comments on the emergence in western society of what he calls a “secondary orality”, a condition which is dominated by electronic modes of communication, but which incorporates elements from both chirographic and oral cultures³⁵.

Although I hesitate to agree entirely with Ong’s classification of and differentiation between oral and

34 Boratav, “La littérature des ‘aşıq’”, 129.

35 Cf. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*.

written cultures, and furthermore am unconvinced that Turkish culture is necessarily modern in this sense, it is nonetheless plausible to argue that “secondary orality” exists in Turkish society, and that it has been brought about by the intervention or influence of the state. The influence of modern forms of communication has certainly touched upon the arts, and especially the art of the *âşiks*. *Âşık* performances were first introduced and maintained by state radio and television stations, until the neo-liberal policies of the Özal era (until approximately the mid 1980’s), which was a period of privatization. “Secondary orality” was, in this sense, further promulgated by the later *âşık* festivals held throughout Turkey and abroad, again organized or at least supported by the state. As early as the 1950’s, state-run radio had popularized the *âşık*-style songs, by airing selections of folk music from Kars and Erzurum, the dominant cities representative of the eastern style in the *hikâye* tradition. Similarly, in the 1960’s and 1970’s, the *Yurttan Sesler Korosu* (Choir of Voices from The Homeland) became an important vehicle for the expression of folk songs from different regions across the country. “Modernized” folk songs were sung by a chorus, attempting to include different regional cultural forms under the codified rubric of “Turkish”³⁶. If non-Turkish folk songs appeared in the mix, they were normalized and labelled as Turkish nonetheless. An example of this is *Âşık Veysel*, a well-known *âşık* of this period, who used to be featured prominently on radio music programmes. He is still revered among musicians in Turkey, and is held up as the role model of an artist to be emulated. His Alevi identity was rarely mentioned, rather his songs were presented as vehicles through which he expressed the bonds of brotherhood, part of a generic kind of “Anatolian humanism”.

Another significant development in the 1960’s and 1970’s was the utilization of the protest tradition of folk culture in urban contexts, something which resulted from the changing character of Alevism as it responded to new political circumstances³⁷. Markus Dreßler explains the ideological polarization of Alevi poetry in the 1970’s:

36 Cf. Irène Markoff, “The Ideology of Musical Practice and the Professional Turkish Folk Musician: Tempering the Creative Impulse”, *Asian Music* 22.1 (1990/91), 129–145: 131.

37 Cf. Karin Vorhoff, “Let’s Reclaim Our History and Culture!’ Imagining Alevi Community in Contemporary Turkey”, *Die Welt*

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“Turkey’s political climate of the 1960’s and even more so of the 1970’s can be characterized in terms of a continuing polarization between ultra-nationalist Turkish and leftist ideologies. On the side of the political arena, the militant right, almost completely Sunni, was bound together mainly by nationalist and anti-leftist ideas, and considered Alevis as heretics”³⁸.

The 1970’s can also be characterized as a period in which the first examples of the *âşık* tradition grew within an urban space. This afforded the Alevi *âşiks* the opportunity of even greater popularity, as most of them accentuated “protest” in their art during a period in which leftist ideas were on the rise, until the military coup finally suppressed the progressive attempts of the left. Certainly, the protest tradition in folk poetry is not a recent invention. The renowned folk poet Pir Sultan Abdal is known through his protest poems of the sixteenth century. On this theme, Rıza Zelyurt notes that Ahmet Çıtak (b. 1897) was among the first poets of protest in the Republican regime³⁹.

The rejuvenation of the *âşık* tradition in an urban context also provided a foundation for the prosperous *türkü-kafe* and *türkü-bar* contexts of the 1990’s and well into the 2000’s. At this time, elements of Kurdish culture (Kurdish folk dance, song, and food) started to become visible in the *âşık* tradition. The poetry of this era dealt with the problems encountered by village migrants in the big city, and with poverty and exclusion. It was because of the political climate during the 1970’s that the “Central Asian” *ozan* (bard) or *halk ozanı* (folk poet) experienced a revival, this time in a different context which emphasized secular, nationalist, and left-wing political ideologies⁴⁰. The city context also provided the *âşiks* with new opportunities to give concerts and record music on records, cassettes, and CDs, something which helped the *âşiks* to carry their tradition into different arenas, and reach out to a larger “popularized” audience. If the political discourse of the day

des Islams N. S. 38.2 (1998), 220–252 and Rıza Zelyurt, *Halk Şiirinde Başkaldırı*, Istanbul: Sosyal, 1989.

38 Dreßler, “Turkish Alevi Poetry”, 125.

39 Zelyurt, *Halk Şiirinde Başkaldırı*, 121.

40 Cf. Dreßler, “Turkish Alevi Poetry”, 116.

dictated to the *âşiks* the parameters of expression within their own tradition, the *âşiks* also responded to these discourses in their own ways, as they have done for centuries from their position of social marginalisation.

Known as a representative of protest voice poets, Âşık İhsanî is one writer from within the tradition who has stressed the theme of social justice in *âşık* poetry. He gives the example of *âşık* Sinem Bacı, who apparently fought against those who accepted bribes and defended social justice in her poetry⁴¹. Similarly, Reinhard-Bauman's study shows that out of seventy songs in the repertoire of Şahturna, twenty one have political content⁴². The authors do not give particular consideration to Şahturna's female identity, but it is significant that an Alevi *âşık*, who was forced to live in Germany because of the political climate in Turkey in her day, has a sizeable number of political songs in her repertoire. Her political commentary is an integral part of her *âşık* identity, a point which is also illustrated by Akdemir and Schiffauer⁴³.

In attempting to explain the role of innovation in women's poetry in the context of "secondary orality", it should be noted that these women have both embraced the technological revolution and have also continued to make use of their interpersonal skills in creating a forum for performance. An important tactic that the women minstrels have used is the deconstruction of the "myth of travelling,"⁴⁴ which was held to be true in the earlier periods of the Alevi poetry.

The most important influence on the changing character of the *âşık*, however, can perhaps be attributed to the impetus generated and implemented by the Turkish state

41 Cf. Âşık İhsanî, *Ozan Dolu Anadolu: Antoloji*, İstanbul 2002 [1974], 26–27.

42 Cf. Reinhard & Baumann, "Şah Turna".

43 Cf. Akdemir and Schiffauer, "Şah Turna", 44–61.

⁴⁴ It is related to a widely held notion that of a "wandering minstrel" of medieval Europe and also of the Anatolian minstrels. The wandering minstrel was a performer who travelled from place to place, performing songs, reciting poetry, etc. Studies on the Turkish hikâye tradition argued that minstrels wandered through Anatolia and recited their poetry. When we examine the poetry of women *âşiks*, they may have not travelled, perhaps, in this "myth" of travelling, but certainly used other forms of travelling to transmit their knowledge and their art. My recent ethnographic work partly ventured that. I talk about this issue in the following paragraphs.

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through its organization of *âşık* festivals⁴⁵. There are various reasons for this “in(ter)vention”, the first of which is the appeal of the festivals to a tourist audience. The fact that the “Ministry of Culture and Tourism” has been known by different names throughout its history, but that it is currently known by this name, reveals the close link in the present day between the state and cultural events, and of the former’s tendency towards intervention therein. However, it is not the only mere rationale for inventing tradition. Additionally, one has to consider the historically informed context of Alevi singing. Since the sects had carried a historical mission of preserving the Alevi culture and especially that of “transmission of religious knowledge”, today the Turkish State takes on a similar responsibility by emphasizing “cultural representation” and “cultural conservation.” Richard Kurin has commented on this phenomenon, and argued that such festivals ensure “the preservation and transmission of traditional cultural repertoires”, which represent “not only continuity with the past, but the ability to enact the future with a variety of proven approaches and sensibilities”, and thus the festivals become explicitly political entities⁴⁶. In the Turkish case, the state assumes the role of a “father”, a role which it has assumed elsewhere in other contexts within the Republican discourse.

This notion of “Father State” also facilitates a female interpretation of the nationalist discourse⁴⁷, by offering “institutional” support for women, something which was once provided by the Alevi and Bektâşi sects. With the closure of the sects in the early years of the new secular regime, the female *âşiks* might have found another source of support and legitimization, yet the institutional role of the state has increased, especially in recent years, as Alevi *âşiks* have become an integral part of folk music celebrations.

45 Cf. Mark Soileau, “Festivals and the Formation of Alevi Identity”, Irene Markussen (ed.), *Alevi and Alevism: Transformed Identities*, Istanbul: İsis, 2005, 91–108.

46 Cf. Richard Kurin, “Why we do the Festival”, Frank Proschan (ed.), *Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife Program Book*, Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Office of Folklife Programs, 1989, 8–21: 10.

47 Cf. Carol Delaney, “Father State”, Carol Delaney & Sylvia Yanagisako (eds.), *Naturalizing Power: Essays in Feminist Cultural Analysis*, (Anthropology, Women’s Studies, Sociology), London et al.: Routledge, 1995, 177–199.

Since the 1960's, Alevi *âşiks* have been engaged in giving large public performances⁴⁸ at events such as the Festival of Hacı Bektaş. Like most of the *âşik* festivals, this is organized during the summer months in order to guarantee maximum participation from transnational Alevis. A similar festival, "*Âşıklar Bayramı*" ('Festival of the Minstrels') is known as the most important venue for *âşiks* to perform at. Furthermore, the research carried out by academics and scholars working on and with minstrels has become an additional vehicle for the transmission of knowledge.

There is, however, a necessary qualifier to all of these observations, which is that in order to make sense of "invented tradition" one has to consider the nature of "tradition". As folklorist Regina Bendix rightly observes:

"Despite the long western history of thought that sees tradition as a stable passing on of traits within a cultural system Handler and Linnekin arrive at the conclusion that the idea of tradition is rather influenced by ideology and thus continued reinterpretation and change. Therefore, 'inventing tradition' is not an anomaly but rather the rule."⁴⁹

There are, from the point of view of the performer, the *âşik*, other reasons for taking part in state festivals. For many *âşiks*, state festivals are avenues to fame, and to making their names known to other artists of their genre. The representation of the female Alevi *âşik* at the festivals is particularly important, as she can be seen to be both influenced and manipulated by the discourse on women and nationalism in the Turkish Republic. In return, though, the festivals become avenues whereby artists can take advantage of the state's support, and in this sense they can be viewed as a kind of "morale-builder", which serve "to strengthen the self-esteem of the folk artists, otherwise neglected or even despised by mass culture, and may enrich

48 Cf. Fuat Bozkurt, *Çağdaşlaşma Sürecinde Alevilik*, (Konumuz Türkiye), İstanbul: Doğan, 2000, 79.

49 Regina Bendix, "Tourism and Cultural Displays: Inventing Traditions for Whom?", *Journal of American Folklore* 102/404 (1989), 131–146: 132.

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their understanding of the culture of which they are the bearers.”⁵⁰.

There is a power-dynamic at play in the relationship between state and *âşık*, which is maintained by its involvement in the festivals. Evidence of this can be seen in the regulations surrounding the allocation of “official” status to *âşiks*. In order to attain this “official” status, *âşiks* are required to play in front of a jury in Ankara, and answer a number of questions. If the questions are answered correctly, the *âşık* is entitled to have his name added to the list of “official” *âşiks*, which then affords him the opportunity to play at festivals organized by the state, and to obtain a visa if he is to travel to festivals abroad⁵¹. Female *âşiks* take part in the festivals as much as their male counterparts do; indeed, they started taking part in the very festivals that were organized within a “popularized” framework. Fatma Oflaz, who is known as Derdimerd, is apparently the first of the female *âşiks* to have taken part in *âşık* festivals⁵².

Whilst Turkish folklorists have long been preoccupied with the debate over the “authentic” nature of the festivals, the more important point is related to the political significance of the state’s involvement in the cultural milieu. For as I have argued elsewhere, the festivals have not only literary but also political consequences⁵³. Richard Bauman and Patricia Sawin note that folklore and folkways are largely the invention of the late eighteenth century, and have always been concerned with the politics of culture. They point out that at folklife festivals in particular, certain aspects of cultural life are valued over others in the service of larger political agendas. They argue that folklife festivals are forms of cultural production in which “symbolically resonant cultural goods and values are placed on public display”, often as a counterpoise to mass, elite or official culture; furthermore, that they are used to preserve and

50 Robert Cantwell, “Conjuring Culture: Ideology and Magic in the Festival of American Folklife”, *Journal of American Folklore* 104/412 (1991), 148–163: 150.

51 Cf. Petzen, “Turkish Women Poet-Singers”.

52 Cf. Ülkü Özel Akagündüz, “Kadın Âşık Olursa...”, <http://www.aksiyon.com.tr/detay.php?id=23716> (3rd April 2006).

53 Cf. Hande Birkalan-Gedik, “Aşıklık Geleneği” and *ibid.*, “Kadın Aşıkların Kimlik Sınırları, Hayatları ve Aşıklık Stratejileri”, *Sanat Cephesi* 25 (2008), 6–10.

promote histories which are seen as valuable and necessary⁵⁴.

4. *Re-Inventing the Âşık Tradition with Women*

If the socio-political context of the 1970's engendered the emergence of the *âşık* identity as protester, it also succeeded in bringing some female *âşiks* out into a more public sphere. History provides us with more examples of female poets, for example those in the eighteenth century. However, as the notion of a female *âşık* resides at the intersections of gender, genre, and nationalism, a few preliminary questions on the female *âşiks* have to be posed: Historically speaking, in what kind of society did women *âşiks* live? How does this compare with the society in which contemporary women *âşiks* live? When one considers the Alevi-Bektaşî background of women *âşiks*, is it possible to identify a pre-feminist mind-set within these particular societies? Could it be argued that women had certain rights in such a society that is generally considered to be "more tolerant" than a Sunni milieu? The questions are many, and could go on at length. In order to address these preliminary thoughts, though, and to offer some explanatory remarks on female *âşiks*, neccassairly, we must consider the society within which the female *âşiks* first emerged.

According to popular perception, the *âşık* tradition is predominantly the domain of men, and playing the *saz* is considered a masculine pursuit. Nonetheless, the first appearance of female *âşiks* becomes apparent at around the end of the eighteenth century. One group of scholars influenced by nationalist views, such as Baki Öz, asserts that many Alevi-Bektaşî female poets have emerged from the hearths (*ocak*)⁵⁵. Accordingly, Veli Asan has presented compilations of poetry of female *âşiks* such as *Âşık Döne*⁵⁶,

54 Cf. Richard Bauman & Patricia Sawin, "The Politics of Participation in Folklife Festivals", I. Karp and S. D. Lavine (eds.), *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, Washington 1991, 288–314: 288f.

55 Cf. Baki Öz, "Hacı Bektaş ve Bektaşilik'te Kadın Anlayışı", <http://www.karacaahmet.com/forum/cevap.asp?kid=3089&cid=4407&katman=2&ait=4398&baslik=7.%20B%C3%96L%C3%9CM> (posted: 17th February 2004, accessed: 15th April 2006).

56 Cf. Veli Asan, *Tahtacı Türkmen Ozanları*, (Kültür Bakanlığı Yayınları; 1656), Ankara: Kültür Bakanlığı, 1997, 47–50.

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Ak Elif⁵⁷, Âşık Fatma (Tirişçe)⁵⁸ and Eşe Kadın⁵⁹. Baki Öz maintains that the Alevi woman was “the follower of the Turkish tradition, and continued to live up to the life-style brought from Central Asia”, and he holds the role of the female minstrels in the Bektaşî hearths in high regard:

“In Anatolia, there were women who were the heads of the Alevi-Bektaşî hearths. The ‘Anşa Bacılılar’ in Tokat is a perfect example of this. When Veli Baba was exiled to Aleppo, his wife Anşa Bacı continued the tradition. This was the first of the hearths that was run by a woman. In Afyon-Emirdağ, in Karacalar village, the group named ‘Hüseynî’ had been attached to the sect maintained by Zöhre Bacı around 1900.”⁶⁰

The “ideal woman” in Alevi-Bektaşî belief has traditionally been encapsulated in the character of the wife of İdris (Enoch, in the Biblical tradition). Known as “Kadıncık Ana”, this prototypical woman is said to have been present at some of the miracles of Hacı Bektaş. The precise details of her identity vary according to different accounts, but whether or not she was the wife or the daughter of Hacı Bektaş, she was certainly a member of the institutional *Bacılar* (sisters), one of the four socio-religious “classes”⁶¹ in Anatolia⁶². The women poets of the *Bacılar* class were able to perform poetry, as they were protected and endorsed by their institutional affiliation.

Female minstrels have also found institutional support under the Republican regime, and their profile within the tradition has been raised as a result of Kemalist feminism. In Kandiyoti’s terms, “women’s emancipation under Kemalism was part of a broader political project of nation-

57 Cf. *ibid.*, 95–105.

58 Cf. *ibid.*, 206–209.

59 Cf. *ibid.*, 214–218.

60 Öz, “Hacı Bektaş ve Bektaşilik’te Kadın Anlayışı”.

61 These classes were: *Gaziler* (the victorious fighters defending the Islamic faith), *Ahiler* (those in the brotherhood, or guild, of tradesmen), *Abdallar* (the wandering dervishes) and *Bacılar* (those in the institutional *Bacı* sisterhood).

62

Cf.

Irène Mélikoff, “Alevi-Bektaşiliğin Tarihsel Kökenleri”, <http://www.alevi.com/23+M5ba81996437.html> (8th March 2007).

building and secularization.”⁶³ In the process of secularization, the Alevis perceive the strengthening of the Sunni collective consciousness as a direct threat to the Republic, (whose secular foundations are held extremely dear in contemporary Alevism) to the extent that portraits of Atatürk, the pillar of Kemalism, are hung on the walls of shrines and *cemevis* amongst pictures of the Twelve Imams.

As folklore in Turkey had developed as a national and nationalist discipline, it emerged within the framework of a patriarchal discourse. As a result, the powerful stereotypical image of the Turkish woman has been primarily shaped by state feminism, and emphasizes the pre-Islamic “authentic” features of her imagined womanhood. Kandiyoti describes the relationship between the state and the Turkish woman in the following way:

“It seems quite clear that the early “romantic phase” of Turkish nationalism was inspired at least in part by a reaction to the extremely negative ethnocentric views of European historians. Assumptions about the elevated position of women in Central Asiatic societies can be seen to emanate from this “romantic phase”, and have continued to influence the republican rhetoric about Turkish women. A case in point is Afet Inan’s classic book *The Emancipation of Turkish Woman*, in which she devotes an important section to the status of women before the advent of Islam. She suggests that the transition to Islam brought about a decline in the status of Turkish women, although she puts this down to the social customs of Arabs and Persians rather than Islam *per se*. Thus, the “new woman” of the republic had ancient and respectable antecedents to invoke.”⁶⁴

Kandiyoti continues by describing the role and image of woman during the War of National Liberation, stating that “peasant women in Anatolia also played critical roles which were celebrated and glorified in public monuments and patriotic rhetoric alike”⁶⁵, and thus exemplifying the attempts made to elevate the role of woman in Turkish society. Kandiyoti’s remarks shed useful light on the attempts of the Turkish Republic to portray the Alevis as

63 Deniz Kandiyoti, “End of Empire: Islam, Nationalism and Women in Turkey”, Deniz Kandiyoti (ed.), *Women, Islam, and the State*, Basingstoke et al.: Macmillan, 1991, 22–47: 43.

64 *Ibid.*, 40–41.

65 *Ibid.*, 37.

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the “true” Turks, a portrayal linked to the pre-Islamic associations also evident in the republican women’s discourse. This is a portrayal which has also been developed in the work of some scholars, such as Irène Mélikoff⁶⁶. Although there is no explicit mention of Alevi women in the Turkish discourse on nationalism and gender, it seems certain that their traditional Central Asian roots were used as a major constituent element in the emergent identity of the republican woman.

The statistics relating to the numbers of female *âşiks* of the same generation offer a valuable insight into the social and cultural life of contemporary Turkey, as well as to the transformation of the Alevi *âşık* tradition with regard to the contribution of women to it. In 2000, there were thirty-five registered female *âşiks* at the Ministry of Culture, eight of whom are known nation-wide.⁶⁷ The findings of my fieldwork suggest, however, that there exist a number of female *âşiks* who are not registered at the Ministry, but who are nonetheless known in their own local contexts.

Starting in the 1970’s, and with a dramatic acceleration in the 1980’s, both the number and the visibility of female minstrels—whose overwhelming majority are Alevis—has increased. In spite of this, the common representation of the Alevi woman had presented something of a “double-edged sword”: A brief perusal of the literature on the Alevis reveals that its women are both highly romanticized, and at the same time bear a distinctive image of action and productivity. Almost all the literature considers the place of Alevi women both within the family and in wider Turkish society, and compares their status favourably to that of their Sunni counterparts. Interestingly, from this tendency of the Alevis to assign to their women a place of relative equality with men, the Sunnis have derived an image of the “loose Alevi woman”. This, in turn, has also impacted (and continues to influence) the status of the female minstrels, for their role is already considered improper by mainstream Turkish society, which recognizes no significant place for women in public discourse. One such representation of Alevi woman as a “loose woman” is derived from the concept of “mum söndü” (‘the candle went

66 Cf. Mélikoff, *Sur les traces du soufisme turc*.

67 This information was obtained by Jennifer Petzen from the folk poetry section of HAGEM (*Halk Araştırmaları Genel Müdürlüğü*).

out’), which alludes to the allegations that group sex is practiced in the dark amongst the mixed congregations of Alevi worship rituals. The fact that the Alevi tradition has long been sustained in secluded places and in absolute secrecy has only served to fuel these rumours, and increase the prejudices of the Sunnis against the Alevis.

5. *Gender and Genre*

Certain folklorists and anthropologists in North America, Europe and the Middle East have called for a new “gender perspective” in folklore studies, in an attempt to move away from the patriarchal discourse which they see as having traditionally dominated that field. This discourse has been particularly significant in the conceptualisation and classification of the different folkloric genres⁶⁸. Revisiting the notion of genre is important, as folklore genres are influential in identifying and distinguishing between different folk groups and communities. In the category of Turkish folklore genres, the representations of women and the roles played by them have long been understood within a structure of gender-appropriated stereotypes. Laments, lullabies, and folktales were thought to belong to the feminine realm, and women are often considered to be the gatekeepers of certain rites of passage in traditional societies. A comprehensive study of the history of the role of women in traditional professions such as healing, midwifery, matchmaking, storytelling, lament singing and fortune telling, would certainly benefit from a feminist

68 Cf. Claire R. Farrer, “Women and Folklore: Images and Genres”, Claire R. Farrer (ed.), *Women and Folklore*, Austin [Tex.]: University of Texas Press, 1975, vii–xvii; Torborg Lundell, “Folktale Heroines and the Type and Motif Indexes”, *Folklore* 94.2 (1983), 240–246; Rosan Jordan & Susan Kalčik (eds.), *Women’s Folklore, Women’s Culture*, Philadelphia [Pa.]: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985; Lila Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society*, Berkeley 1986; Margaret Mills, “Feminist Theory and the Study of Folklore: A Twenty-Year Trajectory”, *Western Folklore* 52 (1993), 173–192; Joan Newlon Radner (ed.), *Feminist Messages: Coding in Women’s Folk Culture*, Urbana [Ill.]: University of Illinois Press, 1993 and Satu Apo et al. (eds.), *Gender and Folklore: Perspectives on Finnish and Karelian Culture*, (Studia Fennica; 4), Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 1998.

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approach⁶⁹. Feminist folklorists in particular have argued that genre systems, far from being neutral, are rather influenced by the politics of interpretation⁷⁰.

The concept of the female minstrel presents a number of interesting linguistically-related issues. In Arabic grammar, what is meant by the term *âşık* is an *active* agent of love (the lover), while the *mâşuk* is, by contrast, the *passive* beloved. It is not only within the bounds of this linguistic categorization, but more importantly, in a highly traditional cultural framework that we find female *âşiks* in a sense challenging their traditionally assigned gender-role within society. The woman, by falling in love and by becoming an *âşık*, puts herself on a level playing field with her male counterparts. In so doing, she rejects the passivity of her ascribed role, and chooses not to follow traditional gender-determined social norms. The woman *âşık* is evasive about situating her subjective status, refuses to conform to socially defined understandings of the role of women and claims for herself a marginal role.

Can the woman *âşık* travel like her male counterpart, whose image has been created with the central “myth of travelling” in mind? How might she attempt to bypass this limitation in order to find acceptance through subversion? In order to address these questions, let us first turn to developments within the “myth of travelling” in the course of the last century:

While the *âşiks* have traditionally travelled throughout Anatolia, relying on the money they obtained from

69 Cf. Hande Birkalan-Gedik, “Practices, Interpretations, and Representations: Proverbs, Adages and Riddles: Turkey and the Caucasus”, Suad Joseph (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Women & Islamic Cultures*, vol. V: *Practices, Interpretations and Representations*, Leiden et al.: Brill, 2007, 525–527; *ibid.*, “Practices, Interpretations, and Representations. Arts: Poets and Poetry, Turkey”, Suad Joseph (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Women & Islamic Cultures*, vol. V: *Practices, Interpretations and Representations*, Leiden et al.: Brill, 2007, 91–92 and *ibid.* “Economics, Education, Mobility and Space: Traditional Female Professions: Turkey”, Suad Joseph (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Women & Islamic Cultures*, vol. IV: *Economics, Education, Mobility and Space*, Leiden et al.: Brill, 2007, 266–267.

70 Cf. Farrer, “Women and Folklore”; Jennifer Fox, “The Creator Gods: Romantic Nationalism and the En-Genderment of Women in Folklore”, *Journal of American Folklore* 100/398 (1987), 563–572 and Kirin Narayan, “The Practice of Oral Literary Criticism: Women’s Songs in Kangra, India”, *Journal of American Folklore* 108/429 (1995), 243–264.

donations or tips given in appreciation of their performances, today they rarely travel in the way that they did in the past. Instead, other forms of “travelling” have opened new avenues for *âşiks* in recent times. The festivals organized by the state, along with the circulation of records, cassettes, and CDs, the internet, and *âşık*-related books and articles offer a source of financial support to today’s minstrel which can reach even to transnational contexts.

In her fieldwork-based study of *âşık* İlkin Many, Petzen states that *âşık* İlkin was only 20 years old when she first appeared at a festival⁷¹. Another female *âşık* known as Sarıcakız recalls that she made certain decisions “in order to participate in the (*âşık*) tradition.” She explains that in her marriages to *Âşık* Reyhanî, *Âşık* Emircan and *Âşık* İhsanî “I was afraid that I was going to be pushed aside in the tradition, but they pushed me away even more.” Her first *saz* was deliberately broken by her father, who reacted angrily to her marriage to Reyhanî⁷². Later in her life (in the 1970’s), Sarıcakız travelled throughout Anatolia with *Âşık* İsmail⁷³.

An example of a female *âşık* who was supported by her son is Mevlude Günbulut, who uses the pen name Mevlude Bacı. Born in Şarkışla in 1921, she often indicated that because she came from a place which had a strong *âşık* tradition, she was often in the company of other *âşiks*. She regretted the fact that no opportunity had been afforded her to attend school, and she was supported by her son, who was himself a folklorist. The book Mevlude Günbulut wrote opened up the door for her to initiation to the role of minstrel⁷⁴, and she is especially known as the poet who composed a lament for Deniz Gezmiş, a famous symbol of the Turkish left.⁷⁵

It seems to be the case that some female *âşiks* gained entrance into the tradition by first learning to play the *saz*. Sürmelican Kaya, for example, was a self-taught *saz* player (and recorded her own cassette), in spite of people around

71 Cf. Petzen, “Turkish Women Poet-Singers”, 16.

72 Cf. Özel Akagündüz, “Kadın *Âşık* Olursa...”.

73 Cf. Petzen, “Turkish Women Poet-Singers”, 13–14.

74 Cf. *Âşık* Mevlüde Günbulut, *N’olaydım, N’olaydım*, Şükrü Günbulut (ed.), Ankara: Ürün, 1998.

75 Cf. Deniz Gezmiş was a prominent figure in the youth movement of 1968. He was arrested and sentenced to death in 1972, together with his friends Yusuf Aslan and Hüseyin İnan. He became a folk hero, a kind of Turkish Robin Hood. For more information about Gezmiş, the work of Behram in this article’s bibliography.

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her thinking it inappropriate for a woman to play. Another female *âşık* who has used cassettes and festivals to promote her art is Senem Akkaş, who was born in 1943 in Sarıkamış. She uses the pen name of Şahsenem Bacı and wrote about love of the homeland, as well as personal love and longing. Her later poems emphasized societal problems. She got married at a very young age and settled in İzmir, finishing high school through long-distance learning, after which she registered at The Open University. The opposition of her husband (a school teacher) to her writing poetry, led to their later divorce. Among Şahsenem Bacı's relatives, many well-known *âşiks* can be found, including Âşık Mustafa of Sarıkamış. Şahsenem Bacı participated in many *âşık* festivals and was the first runner-up in 1975 at the Hacı Bektaş Festival. At the time of writing she has made five cassettes⁷⁶.

Most of the female *âşiks* have published their own books or anthologies. İlkın Manya has published *Halk Şiirinde Ana Sesi*, [The Mother's Voice in Folk Poetry] (1983)⁷⁷ which is a collection of different poems. Şahturna's book *Şakıyan Turna Şahturna* [Şahturna, The Singing Crane] (1998)⁷⁸, is a compilation of her own poetry. Mevlude Günbulut's son published a book on her life and poems entitled *N'olaydım, N'olaydım* [I wish I were] (1998)⁷⁹. Şahsenem Bacı collated her poems in a volume entitled *Söz Nereye* [Where the Words Go] (1990)⁸⁰, and she was awarded first place at the Hacı Bektaş Festival in 1975. Âşık İhsanî notes that the female minstrel Fevziye Bacı also published two books entitled *Cehaletin Kurbanı* [The Victim of Ignorance] and *Ettin Buldun* [You Got What You Deserved]⁸¹. These female minstrels can be seen to have gained a certain sense of confidence through these publications, which have been used as instruments of their public initiation to a traditional art form.

Âşiks do not, of course, exist in isolated environments, and the artists and the academics have had something of a reciprocal influence on each other. This influence has, on

76 Cf. Bekir Karadeniz, "Şahsenem Bacı." <http://www.folkloredebiyat.com/sahsenem.htm> (25th April 2006).

77 İlkın Manya, *Halk Şiirinde Ana Sesi*, (İnanç Yayınları; 3), İstanbul: İnanç, 1983.

78 Şahturna Ağdaşan, *Şakıyan Turna Şahturna*, İstanbul 1998.

79 Günbulut, *N'olaydım, N'olaydım*.

80 Şahsenem Akkaş, *Söz Nereye*, 1990.

81 Cf. Âşık İhsanî, *Ozan Dolu Anadolu*.

occasion, been evident in the relationship between the *âşiks* and state folklorists, festival organizers, book publishers, and the music industry. Şahturna's case is a particularly interesting one in this regard, as she makes wide use of references both from scholarly articles and newspaper reports on her art in order to inform the users of her website about her art. This phenomenon can be attributed at least in part to transnational migration, which makes cultural and economic borders more fluid. The internet is the primary vehicle for this fluidity, a part of what Appadurai has termed “ethnoscapes”⁸², a new order in which traditional forms are created and recreated in new contexts. The relationship between academic and *âşık* has been important since the days of the early collections, as is exemplified Boratav’s recollections:

“Certainly, I had a friendship with all of them. When I asked questions, I asked them in a friendly manner...We used to drink tea together. The *âşiks* drink a lot of tea. We used to have friendly conversations. As they were narrating *hikâye*, I used to write them down. There were no recorders at that time.”⁸³

The case of Âşık Veysel, his discovery in a remote Anatolian village and subsequent rise to national fame (arguably the greatest amongst his contemporaries of the twentieth century), is a case in point, for instrumental in this process was the poet Ahmet Kutsi Tecer, demonstrating something about the process of becoming an *âşık* in the early republican period. The publication of books, recording of records and cassettes, creation of websites, and the relationship between *âşiks* and academics, as well as other factors contributing to the establishment of “secondary orality,” have had a popularizing effect on the *âşık* tradition. The traditional “love potion” is replaced by these new elements.

82 Cf. Arjun Appadurai, „Global Ethnospaces: Notes and Queries for a Transnational Anthropology“, Richard Gabriel Fox (ed.), *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present*, Santa Fe [NM]: School of American Research Press, 1991, 191–210.

83 Hande Birkalan, “Pertev Naili Boratav and his Contributions to Turkish Folklore”, unpublished M.A. Thesis, Bloomington [Ind.] 1996.

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5.1 Transmission and Innovation: Themes and
Techniques in Female Âşik Poetry

The innovative techniques of the female minstrels have been timely in their development. . As well as being in step with the technological revolution, the female *âşiks* have also managed to create new motifs surrounding the transmission of knowledge in the *âşik* tradition. In this regard, the work done by researchers on the dream motif and the love potion has tended to neglect the significance of the latter's psychological effects, which can be said to have something of a placebo effect on the artist. Let us consider, for example, the "dream motif", which even amongst male *âşiks* has metamorphosed somewhat in the twentieth century. Female *âşiks* have, in turn, developed different tactics through which they can gain initiation into their roles as *âşiks*. While the figure of woman is often dealt with by male poets as an erotic object or an object of desire, the image of women in women's poetry is, contrastingly, imagined rather more multi-dimensionally. Some female poets have relied upon images of "motherhood," while others have emphasized political ideology in their poetry. Furthermore, while the identities of some female poets have been determined by their religious poetry, for others, the "mundane", this-worldly character of their poetry has been the source of their own self-definition.

An examination of the life narratives of the *âşiks* whom I interviewed (as well as the relevant existing literature of the lives of female *âşiks*) revealed the prevalence in their work of particular themes, amongst which are those of violence and suffering. The source of that suffering might be a husband, wider family, or poverty. A woman might become an *âşik* through one of the following motifs: falling in love with a man; marrying a man; receiving the encouragement of a man (usually her son); or receiving help from other *âşiks*. The impact of academics, other researchers and the internet is also significant, especially in light of transnational population flows. Thus the master narrative of the "master-novice" relationship is creatively reshaped, in a style in which regional variations are also detectable.

Do the women *âşıks*, then, still claim to have drunk the love potion on their initiation into the tradition? If not, what has the love potion motif been replaced by? There are a number of potential answers to this question, one of which is demonstrated by Hürremî of Kısas's claim to have received the love potion 'openly' ("açıktan aldım"), meaning that she was initiated by the religious leader (*dede*), not through the sequence of a dream, but directly through his own direct intervention.

6. *Kısas-Urfa: The Cultural and Religious Contexts of Alevism*

Urfa is an ancient city in southeastern Turkey, which is inhabited by Turkish, Kurdish and Arab populations, and amongst them Sunnis as well as Alevis. There are three villages in which the Turkmen-Alevis live (Kısas, Akarınar and Sırrın) besides a small quarter in Urfa proper. A project led by the Cem Vakfı entitled, "The Development of Cultural Heritage in Urfa Kısas" has helped Alevism to become more visible in the region and has played an important role in attracting researchers in the last few years. The Alevis of Kısas have also designed a website, which incorporates a section on the "celebrities" of the region: Âşık Büryanî (Hamdullah Aykut), Veli Baba (Veli Erenler), Âşık Sefaî (Mehmet Acet) and Dertli Divanî (Veli Aykut). Interestingly, no mention is made of any female *âşıks*.

Kısas, one of the three counties where Alevis live in the province of Urfa, lies twelve kilometres from the city centre, and has a population of approximately 6,000 people⁸⁴. Kısas is known as the "Land of the *Âşıks*", and is a place that can claim to be the origin of *âşıks* such as Âşık Dertli Divanî, Âşık Sefaî and Âşık Doksandaon, as well as many others.⁸⁵ These *âşıks* have sustained the tradition mainly in "local" contexts and in the *cem* ceremonies, the ritual gatherings of the Alevis.

84 Cf. Aşır Kayabaşı, "Kısas'ın Coğrafi Konumu ve Tarihçesi", Fatma Ulubey (ed.), *Bir Şehir: Şanlıurfa, bir Belde: Kısas. Cem Vakfı Kısas Kültürel Mirası Geliştirme Projesi*, İstanbul: CEM Vakfı, 2006, 48–54: 48.

85 Fatma Sezgin's evaluation of the folk poets of Kısas, and their repertoires, is worth being consulted in spite of its limitations.

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Unlike in the eastern *âşık* tradition, the *âşiks* in Kısas are not itinerant. Instead, they belong to a relatively “closed” environment, where they make their living through farming or doing practical jobs locally. Furthermore, in Kısas, the *âşık* tradition is characterised by two primary factors: its role in the *cem* rituals, and at the *muhabbet* (informal conversation) sessions which precede the *cem*, where the older poems of *âşiks* of previous generations are sung and memorized. Because most of the tradition is learnt thus, in the context of religious rituals, the *âşiks* of Kısas call themselves *cem aşığı* or “singers of the *cem*”⁸⁶. The *âşiks* do not only come together within religious contexts, such as the wedding ceremonies, or when guests show up in town. However, they do not have regular meetings either⁸⁷. So the “traditional” route to becoming an *âşık* is maintained through participation in religious rituals and singing the poems of well-known minstrels of the past, while the dream-motif is not seen except in the narratives of one *âşık*⁸⁸.

6.1. Two Female Âşiks from Kısas

In this section, I present excerpts from several interviews I conducted with Hürü Aşan and Emine Uğur in May 2006, in order to illustrate their roles in the *âşık* tradition. Both *âşiks* are originally from Kısas, and are maternal cousins. Hürü Aşan currently lives in Urfa; Emine Uğur moved away to Mersin some 10 years ago. I attended a stage performance by Hürü Aşan at the Kısas Festival, which was considered an important vehicle for the *âşiks* in Kısas. This performance was part of a larger project entitled, “The Development of Cultural Heritage in Kısas,” which was organized jointly by the European Union, The GAP (Southeast Anatolia) Project, and the *Cem* Association. Hürü Aşan was the only female poet at the festival, and she

86 Fatma Sezgin, “Günümüzde Şanlıurfa Kısas Köyü Âşıklık Geleneği ve Kısaslı Âşıklar”, unpublished M.A. Thesis, Adana 1998, 28f.

87 Cf. *ibid.*, 32f.

88 Cf. Fatma Sezgin-Türkkol et al. (eds.), *Kısas'ın İzleri*, İstanbul 2007, 38.

sang on stage with *saz* accompaniment from her nephew.⁸⁹ Hürü Aşan has also performed at the famous Hacı Bektaş Festival, an event which was organized for the first time in 2007, in honour of the thirteenth century Sufi saint, Hacı Bektaş, in the province of Turkey which carries his name.

Hürü Aşan

Writing under the pen name of Enginî, Hürü Aşan lives in the centre of Urfa, in a *cemevi*, where she is provided with a private room. She has a son and a daughter, Özgür, who is married with two children. When I visited Hürü Aşan in Urfa in May 2006, her son Muzaffer was completing his military service in Ankara. The first thing she said on beginning her life narrative was, “ben kadersizim” (‘I have no [good] fortune’). As she continued her story, she explained that, “the midwife who delivered me was blind. Think about it, a midwife with two blind eyes.” She went on to tell me the story behind the poem which she was about to sing:

“My husband was in Germany, and my daughter was very small. A few of us went to the hills to milk the sheep. We got so wet that we didn’t even have the energy to come back. I brought the milk containers back, but I left my sister-in-law there. My mother-in-law noticed that her daughter was still in the hills, and she shouted at me and hit me. I went back to the hills, where I composed this poem, but I never sing it in the presence of my mother-in-law.”⁹⁰

Mamaşa⁹¹

Yağmur yağdı aman Mamaşa’da	It started raining and I got
islandım	drenched in Mamaşa
Tepenin üstünden köye	From the top of the hill I called
seslendim	out to the village

⁸⁹ I wish to thank Arzu Durmaz, who was instrumental in providing contacts with Hürü Aşan and Emine Uğur.

⁹⁰ Hürü Aşan, *Interview*. Urfa, 22nd May 2006.

⁹¹ My own translation.

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Yedi sene beklemekten usandım	I'm tired, I've been waiting for seven years
N' olur ya sen gel ya beni de götür	Please, either come or take me with you
N' olur ya sen gel ya beni de götür	Please, either come or take me with you
Mamaşa dağ değil, kolay çıkılır	Mamaşa is not too high, you can climb it easily
Çıkıp gelen dedi çiya bakılır	People talk about watching the hills around
Ben güler oynarım canım sıkılır	I laugh and play, but I am bored deep inside
N' olur ya sen gel ya beni de götür	Please, either come or take me with you
N' olur ya sen gel ya beni de götür	Please, either come or take me with you
Enginî der ki zehir kattın aşma	Enginî says that you put poison in my food
Acımadın gözlerimin yaşına	And you had no mercy for my tears
Ali ile Muhamed'in aşkına	For the sake of Ali and Muhammed
N' olur ya sen gel ya beni de götür	Please, either come or take me with you
N' olur ya sen gel ya beni de götür	Please, either come or take me with you

Hürü Aşan's greatest trauma is the sudden desertion she experienced at the hands of her husband a few years previously, the two of them having spent only a few years together as husband and wife. Her husband spent seven years in Germany working as a *Gastarbeiter*, and on his return to Urfa, he accepted culpability, and the associated two and a half year jail sentence, for someone else's crime. Hürü was left with her daughter and son, and as a single mother, she felt the need to convince her husband's family of her intention to remain alone, stating that, "I will never marry again. If anyone attacks my honour and chastity, I will take care of it myself"⁹². When her husband was released from jail, he disappeared immediately, or as Hürü herself expressed it, "just like that."

92 Hürü Aşan, *Interview*. Urfa, 22nd May 2006.

While the poem given above falls within the broad genre of love poetry, it also exhibits some of the conventional characteristics of poetry particular to Kısas. Stylistically, it is addressed to (and offers advice to) the second person, a feature which characterizes Kısas poetry, as does the use of repetition and refrains seen here. Its simple and direct style characterizes it as a typical example of a folk poem. While it talks about the poet's personal suffering, it is not primarily a poem about earthly love. It contains references to two of the most important personages of Islam: The Prophet Mohammed, and Ali, the acclaimed leader of Alevism. What makes "Mamaşa" different from Anatolian poetry that is more "traditional" is its central theme of personal love and suffering, which derives from the poet's loneliness, and can be situated within the traditional definition neither of the religious nor of the *âşık* style. In this sense, Hürü makes use of innovative techniques not only in the composition of her poetry but also in the modes of its transmission.

Hürü has worked at various different jobs in order to support herself financially. She was forced to hand in her notice at her last job at the Chamber of Pharmacists because of her Alevi identity. Despite wanting to continue to higher study, Hürü only received a primary school education, and when her daughter started school, she began studying for her high school certificate by long-distance learning. Although her husband was only with her for a short while, he was always supportive of Hürü's desire to receive an education and he also lent his support to her artistry. She is proud of being the first woman to perform in the Urfa *cemevi*⁹³. Hürü talks about the early days of singing her poetry:

"I used to compose and sing my poetry at home. The youngsters recorded my voice a long time ago, and they used to play the recordings and listen to my singing. First my mother-in-law, then my father-in-law heard about it. They were angry with me, but I continued singing. In every house in Kısas, there is always someone who plays the *saz*. I thought about playing the *saz*, too. My husband

93 Cf. *ibid*.

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even got one, but I had too much to do, and I never got around to it”⁹⁴.

Some of the other *âşiks* (her father-in-law, himself an *âşik* of Kısas, included.) were, however, opposed to Hürü singing poetry, and researchers seeking her out had apparently on occasion been given the wrong address by the *âşiks*. Like the other *âşiks* of Kısas, Hürü Aşan only sang in Urfa, and did not become a wandering *âşik*. The extract above shows that whilst she comes from within the tradition, her initiation was not through the “master-novice” learning process. Rather, her pen-name was given to her by the religious leader Veli Ulusoy in 2005 over the telephone, demonstrating perhaps a more realistic initiation to the art of the *âşik* in the context of “secondary orality”. According to Hürü, there are many motivations and rewards in the writing of poetry, and she explains some of them thus: “I sit on the mountains, I write on them; I sit on the rocks and stones, I write on them.” She refrains from calling herself an *âşik* out of modesty, and yet she clearly performs such a role:

“I used to write poetry, but we had no home and my poems got mislaid and lost. They perished. I appeared on a television programme about Kısas. I knew Halil Ergören, who is from here, and he was to appear on television. He said, ‘Sister, they’re making a programme for television, why don’t you come on it?’ I said, ‘People will not approve. There is the tradition to consider.’ But, then I thought about it, and my husband told me that he was with me, supporting me. ‘It is not like you are going around door to door’, he said.”⁹⁵

As she had foreseen, her participation at the religious rituals did not go uncontested. Her exclusion from the *cem* ceremony also implied an exclusion from religious knowledge. Some people in the congregation did not like her singing in the rituals, and complained about her presence there to her husband:

94 Ibid.

95 Ibid.

“People at the *cem* asked my husband why I was attending. I told him that I could stop going, if he did not want me to sing. He said that of course that wasn’t the case. When I went to the *cem* the second time, I said, ‘Oh brothers, look at me! There are no women apart from me. You are all men. I see that. There was a *cemevi* in the village and the women were welcomed there. But here, does my presence make you uncomfortable?’ My sister’s husband was a *baba*. He said, ‘Why should it? What’s happened?’ Nobody said anything to my face. The next Friday, a man who worked at post office, brought his wife, and now women can come to the *cems*.”⁹⁶

*Gadasın Aldığım*⁹⁷

Beni koyup bunca dertle	Leaving me with so many troubles,
Gitme gadasın aldığım	Don’t go; I take all your grief
Bir derdime bin dert daha	Into my sea of quandaries.
Katma gadasın aldığım	Don’t add more; I assume all your grief.
Ne olacak benim halım	What is going to happen to me?
Boynunda kalsın vabalım	My sins are on your shoulders
Çok çektirdin bana zulüm	Because you made me suffer.
Yeter gadasın aldığım	Enough, I assume all your grief.
Çok gezdirdin gurbet elde	You made me travel in foreign lands;
Beni düşürdün bu derde	You made me fall into this trouble.
Kölem diye pazarlarda	As your slave, in the markets
Sat be gadasın aldığım	Sell me; I assume all your grief.
Engin bu dertli başımı	Engin, this troubled head of mine.
Gözden akıttım yaşımı	I let my tears run down from my eyes.
Beni görünce kaşını	When you see me,
Yıkma gadasın aldığım	Don’t raise your eyebrow at me.

Hürü says, “My life is so mixed up, it is like *aşure*”, referring to the festive food of the Alevi which, according to some recipes, should contain at least twelve different grains. She continues, “It is neither good nor bad. I just cannot find the middle way.” In addition to demonstrating this liminality which she refers to, this second poem is also

96 Ibid.

97 My own translation.

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the best illustration of her personal suffering expressed in
verse.

Emine Uğur

Emine Uğur uses the pen name of Hürremî and she sings her poems at *cem* rituals. She cannot play the *bağlama*, however, and she says that, “I was into singing folk songs and I started to write *deyiş* later on. I have been singing for almost 30 years.” Emine Uğur, like Hürü Aşan, presents a realistic model of a mode of initiation into the role of *âşık*. Like Hürü Aşan, she received her pen name through a phone conversation with the religious leader Veli Ulusoy of Kısas. She explains that, “He himself also sings as Hürremî. His grandfather’s name is Veli Hürrem”⁹⁸. She believes that the source of inspiration for her poetry is the problems that she has experienced in life. She asks: “Is it that we don’t have any problems? Oh, we have so many of them. Poetry is worship. Love is also worship. Hacı Bektaş Veli tells us so in his poems. There is no bargain in love.” She explains the link between love and worship, as she considers the two mutually inseparable. She talks about the process of her having become an *âşık* in the following way:

“In Germany, I used to sing with my husband. Then I decided to record my own voice. My voice was like fire at times. I wish I still had the voice I had back then. People were impressed by my voice. Of course, my love has not changed, but my voice has. It was so strong then, so full of burning. Sefa Ulusoy is the *pir* of the *âşiks*. He recorded my voice then and had my parents listen to it on cassette.”⁹⁹

Emine Uğur expresses herself through religious poetry, in which she believes that she expresses a love of the *Ehl-i Beyt* (the Family of Mohammed.). However, she also composes satire, and she uses some of the most common imagery of traditional Alevi poetry in her poems:

Cemalın görmeden âşık You made me fall in love, without
ettiren seeing your face.

98 Emine Uğur, *Interview*, Mersin, 18th May 2006.

99 Ibid.

HANDE BIRKALAN-GEDIK

Aşkın ateşiyle yandıran bu dost
Dolusunu verip, özüm kandıran
Boş kovandım, özüm dolduran bu dost

Friend, you made me burn with the fire of love;
You gave me the potion, you lured me.
I was an empty glass, you filled me.

Hü dost hü dost
Canım efendim
Ali yar, Ali yar, Ali yar
Dinim imanım

Oh, friend, my friend,
My beloved master;
Ali my love, Ali my love,
My faith, my conviction.

Elbete sevilir böyle bir güzel
Aşkı muhabbeti ettiler güzel
Gönül sarayında salınır gezer
Gönülü gönüle yettiren bu dost

Certainly, a beauty like this is loved;
They made the love and affection beautiful.
He walks around the palace of the heart;
He brings the hearts of people together.

(Nakarat) (Refrain)

Ne kadar bilersen, büyüğün düşün
Yoksa zorlaşır gittikçe işin
Gönül nasihatı hep sana peşin
Katarı katarı yettiren bu dost

However much you know, think of your elder,
Otherwise, your work gets harder.
Always, the advice is in advance.
It is the friend who brings the cranes together.

(Nakarat) (Refrain)

Bilir gerçeğin nerde olduğun
Nerde dolduğum, nerde boşaldığım
Bu kadar hikmeti nerden aldığım
Boş kovandım, özüm dolduran bu dost

He knows where the truth is,
Knows where I am full, where I am empty;
Knows where I get this wisdom.
I was an empty glass. It is the friend who fills me.

(Nakarat) (Refrain)

Hürremî sözlerin gerçekten ilaç
Seven sevdiğine her zaman muhtaç
Beni böyle eden ne Mekke ne Hac
Kendimi kendime yetiren bu dost

Hürremî, your words are the true cure;
The lover always needs the beloved.
Neither Mecca nor pilgrimage made me so;
It is the friend who empowered me.

(Nakarat) (Refrain)

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Conclusion

Women poets' Alevi identity has provided the female folk poets with a certain sense of liberation; a milieu in which they can manoeuvre. Yet the old patriarchal pressure has always been present in the background. There seem to be two important points that have elicited a response from the female minstrels: firstly, the state's promotion of *âşik* poetry has emphasized certain differences in style, region, performance and repertoire, calling particular attention to the *âşik* style of the eastern tradition. Secondly, though, it is true to say that female *âşik*s have emerged within local traditions, giving voice to their regional styles, but performing their own personal repertoires as well as the other traditional songs of the famous masters. For example, as in the specific tradition of Kısas, the *âşik*s were not required to be itinerant, they were able to stay in the place where they produced their poetry. At the juncture of the "national" and the "local" lies the "personal", which is the ethos of the *âşik*s, and which presents an important area in which women bring in an incredible amount of creativity to a highly traditional form of art.

In seeking meaning in the art of the female minstrels, it is necessary to reconsider the grand narratives in the history of *âşik* poetry, wherein lie some problematic cases. As Rebecca Bryant has recently underlined, the *saz* tradition, a national icon of the "past living in the present"¹⁰⁰, is only one important aspect of this problem. The concept of "past living in the present" implies that the *âşik* can be understood in the "ethnographic present", and that so too can scholarly knowledge. The "ethnographic present" can refer to many different situations, including writing in the present, exclusion of self from the text, or seeking ethnographic authority for maintaining what is perceived to be a "scientific" perspective. Johannes Fabian is critical of the reading of ethnographic studies with only the present tense in mind, as he considers that such an assumption necessarily freezes the effects of the passage of time¹⁰¹. Similarly, McKnight criticizes this approach with

100 Rebecca Bryant, "The Soul Danced into the the Body: Nation and Improvisation in Istanbul", *American Ethnologist* 32.2 (2005), 222–238.

101 Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object*, New York [NY]: Columbia University Press, 1983.

reference to societies that do not have a written culture, because of the danger of wrongly imprisoning its subjects within one specific period of history¹⁰². My own criticism is founded however in dissatisfaction with a reading of history that does not take into account the agents of change at work within it, and thus considers tradition to be something of a frozen phenomenon, which is the same at any given time in the past, or present. This approach seems, unfortunately, to be reflected in the vast majority of the literature, and results in the production of knowledge which lacks the necessary nuance of historical depth.

Based on the grand theory of the *âşık* poetry and performances, most of the data came from the eastern tradition, manly illustrated in the *hikâye* performances. The research to date has attempted to create systematic patterns within which to situate the *âşiks*, in order to establish tidy scholarly categories, whilst overlooking the variations of transmission of artistic knowledge, which are exemplified in the “master-novice” relationship, and in the creation of the “myth of travelling”. Considered thus the women *âşiks*’ creativity can certainly be read as innovation, and their techniques for learning and performance can be understood as “re-invention”. Yet it should be remembered that this is not an invention from within a void of previous tradition, but that the women *âşiks* have rather worked carefully and creatively with the resources already available to them in order to produce and sustain their art.

When their life histories are examined, it becomes obvious that the epitome of the women’s performances is the theme of suffering. The example of Enginî shows the suffering which was incurred from the breakdown of her marriage, not only in being deserted by her husband and left as a single mother, but also in the subsequent lack of support, and even criticism of her single status, which she received from her in-laws. Rather than give in to the pressures from her husband’s family, though, Enginî responded by continuing to write and sing. For Enginî, writing poetry and singing at rituals and festivals became her outlet for innovative self-expression.

The case of Hürremî is in many ways the opposite of Enginî, and her Alevi identity has been the main factor

102 David McKnight, “Australian Aborigines in Anthropology”, Richard Fardon (ed.), *Localizing Strategies: Regional Traditions of Ethnographic Writing*, (Smithsonian Series in Ethnographic Inquiry), Edinburg et al.: Scottish Academic Press, 1990, 42–70.

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behind the composition of her poetry. Most of the female poets, with the exception of the women who belonged to the Bektaşî sect, displayed middle-class sensibilities, yet some of them “used” the power and influence of the male *âşiks* in order to get into the profession and to survive. While women’s religious poetry is permissible, as the example of Emine Uğur suggests, the this-worldly poems of Hürü Aşan, on the other hand, were considered inappropriate by the wider community. The religious doctrine of the Alevi-Bektaşîs is still coded within a patriarchal domain, and the women’s various cases suggest that they do not enjoy a very liberated status within it.

Besides my examples from Kısas, there are other examples of female *âşiks*. Many of the female *âşiks* who could travel had small budgets of their own, whilst those who had more limited mobility were forced to rely upon the male figures (such as husbands and sons) in their lives. Performance as a female *âşik* continues to be increasingly difficult, on account of both financial problems and family pressure. Recording cassettes to sell, and participating in national and international festivals requires some degree of negotiation not only with family and contractors but also with the society within which the female *âşiks* live. Interestingly though, in spite of the inordinate amount of stress encountered by the female *âşiks*, they do not appear to offer one another any support and neither do they seem to meet together in groups. This would appear to demonstrate a different form of patriarchy at work in the female milieu, as well as a certain sense of marginality among women, which finds expression in creativity and continuity¹⁰³.

Başgöz observes that the male *âşik* has need of the female image in order to express his own personal protest, usually on reaching the age of puberty. According to Başgöz, the girl in the dream is a female protecting spirit, “who symbolized the Goddess, mother, and protector of the shamans. Her support provides the boy with the courage and self-confidence necessary in his challenge of his father”¹⁰⁴. In light of this, he concludes that the symbolic woman in the dream acts as a kind of valve for the boy to

103 Özel Akagündüz, “Kadın Âşık Olursa...”.

104 Başgöz, “Love Themes”.

discharge the latent energy inside him. The female image becomes the erotic object of the male *âşık* and also the vehicle for his entrance into the realm of artistry. The girl in the dream is also an object of inspiration and passionate love. How, then, do women *âşiks* understand the initiation experience? What is the object of their initiation and inspiration? This was unclear to me when I first became interested in the topic of women *âşiks*, but it was my hope that such an object of inspiration existed. A number of examples preceded my own investigation, mainly of female poets in Ottoman court poetry and in modern Turkish literature¹⁰⁵. It has been my discovery from listening to the stories of the female *âşiks* that their experiences have been caught between two extremes, one of desire and the other of disdain. A version of a largely patriarchal history has succeeded in building a thick wall blocking out the women's voices and rendering them voiceless. Without wishing to consider the women poets as helplessly "bound by tradition", and without wanting to assume that all women poets want and ask for the same thing, I have aimed to demonstrate what women have succeeded in doing with an art form with traditionally highly conventional strategies. In *Women's Ways of Knowing*, Belenky invites us to explore the nature and the different stages of "built knowledge"¹⁰⁶. I tried to follow her invitation and explored into the lif histories of femal *âşiks* from Kısas. Lastly, I underline that the knowledge of the female *âşiks* is built in an area where the porosity between art and life is extremely high. In order for more nuanced conclusions to be reached on this subject, we have need of further life stories of women *âşiks* that we can analyse systematically and

105 Cf. the various online publications of Ayten Mutlu in the bibliography to this article; Zehra Toska, "Kadın Edebiyatına Dair", *Sanat Dünyamız* 21/63 (1996), 45–59; Kemal Silay, "Singing his Words: Ottoman Women Poets and the Power of Patriarchy", Madeline Zilfi (ed.), *Women in the Ottoman Empire: Middle Eastern Women in the Early Modern Era*, (The Ottoman Empire and its Heritage; 10), Leiden et al.: Brill, 1997, 197–213; Çiğdem Aktaş, <http://64.233.179.104/search?q=cache:GZj9I3pID14J:www.hbektas.gazi.edu.tr/14Aktas.htm+Arife+Baci&hl=de&gl=de&ct=clnk&cd=8> (9th March 2006) and Nazan Bekiroğlu, "Osmanlı'da Kadın Şairler", <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/ozel/edebiyat/kadinsair/osmanli.html> (3rd January 2006).

106 Mary Field Belenky et al. (eds.), *Women's Way of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind*, New York [NY]: Basic Books, 1997 [1986].

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through which we can consider and scrutinize their art, their techniques in the transmission of knowledge and the modes of their performance.

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