The Aesthetics of Public Visibility: Alevi *Semah* and the Paradoxes of Pluralism in Turkey

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Efforts to theorize pluralism have often explored the challenges posed by the public visibility of ethnic, linguistic, and sectarian differences to modernist imaginaries of a homogeneous national body. In this essay, I examine a context in which public expressions of communal differences re-inscribe the categories of the nation they were meant to contest. The situation reveals what I call a paradox of pluralism.

If much liberal theory has concerned itself with prescriptive questions about whether and how socio-cultural plurality ought to be reflected in structures of governance (e.g., Rawls 1993; Taylor 1994; Kymlicka 1995), critics of such approaches have instead insisted that in actual historical contexts structures of governance have long been invested in demarcating and policing communal boundaries (Appadurai 1996; Scott 1999; Chatterjee 2004). While these latter investigations have often centered on colonial forms of governmentality, more recent inquiries interrogate what Povinelli (2002: 6) refers to as "multicultural domination": the demand by states and majority populations that minorities— or indigenous communities in settler colonial states—perform and authenticate their difference within the moral and legal frameworks determined by those demanding agencies (see also Asad 1993; Comaroff and Comaroff 2004; Sullivan 2005). Critical theory, in other words, has been less sanguine than its liberal counterparts, not only about the gap between political theory and

institutional practice, but also about the very autonomy of socio-cultural differences from institutional sanction.

I seek to extend the analysis of the limits of multicultural difference, but in a context in which multiculturalism, or pluralism as I will refer to it, exists as merely one framing of politics among several.[1] I focus my attention on Turkey, a nation-state in which demands for greater political recognition of cultural plurality continue to be issued by domestic actors from a variety of minority ethnic and religious groups, as well as by political commentators and representatives of institutional bodies in the European Union. Pluralism in Turkey exists less as an established mode of governance and legal adjudication than as one critical perspective on state practice. The Turkish case allows us to explore pluralism as an incipient rather than entrenched mode of politics. It invites reflection on the social practices necessary to successfully conjure a pluralist framing of politics, and on those that preclude its emergence.

This essay centers on public performances of rituals that distinguish Turkey's Alevi Muslim community from the Sunni majority. I offer an account of debates about the state's categorization of such practices, debates that frequently raise questions about whether Alevi rituals constitute a form of national folklore or of Islamic worship. I conjoin to this account of public argument an examination of the historical development of aesthetic forms that have mediated the community's public visibility in ways that have rendered the latter palatable and often pleasurable to a national audience.

Building upon analyses that draw attention to practices that constitute the contextual modes of public address (Warner 2002; Hirschkind 2006; Wedeen 2008), I detail the social, spatial, and material practices that mediate the public circulation of performances of Alevi ritual. Such mediations enable expressions of a pluralist challenge to the national state, even as they incorporate the minority into the rhythms and gestures of national spectacle. My aim is to interrogate the limits of pluralist politics not only as a function of national ideologies but also in terms of emergent forms of visibility and the sensibilities with which they articulate.

Scholars estimate that anywhere from 15 to 20 percent of the Turkish population is Alevi.[2] Such numbers have not been corroborated by the state's

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[1] My analytical preference for the term "pluralism" results from the fact that the term leaves underdetermined the nature of the social difference in question, whereas multiculturalism already invokes one of the terms that, as will be shown later, is at stake in the debates discussed here, namely, "culture." The question of whether a certain ritual phenomenon represents a difference of culture or a difference of religion is central to the arguments about pluralism in the Turkish context explored in this essay. It is worth noting that both "multiculturalism" (çok kültürlülük) and "pluralism" (çoğulculuk) are terms that are used in contemporary Turkish, whose overlaps and divergences in political discourse would be worth examining in greater depth than is possible here. I thank Banu Karaca for drawing my attention to this point.

[2] The Alevi population is internally divisible along ethnic lines, finding adherents among Turkish, Kurdish, and Arab communities. The segmentations can be taken further still: Among

statistical bureau, since differences between the Sunni majority and the Alevi minority are not measured by the national census—both groups are officially considered to be Muslim, a category of religious identification for which the state does not recognize sectarian distinctions.[3] Having long inhabited rural regions of southwestern, central, and eastern Anatolia, large numbers of Alevis began migrating to towns and cities, both domestically and internationally, as industrial laborers in the context of state-led urbanization and industrialization in the 1960s. Over the next several decades, Alevi populations began to organize communal activities in city centers, and by the late 1980s, Alevis in both Turkey and Europe were mobilizing a socio-political movement, organizing rituals in public squares, demanding recognition as a distinct community from the Turkish state, and calling for an end to *de facto* discrimination in sites of public employment and schooling. As a result, Alevi ritual and religion acquired a degree of visibility in the urban milieu as never before, leading a burgeoning chorus of commentators to depict contemporary Alevism as a "public religion" (e.g., Yavuz 2003; Ellington 2004; Göner 2005; Şahin 2005; Sökefeld 2008).

Inspired in part by Casanova's (1994) critical interrogation of the secularization thesis, recent discussions of public religion in Muslim societies have described instances in which the presence of religion in spaces of public interaction has facilitated participation in debates about the common good, often with the effect of countering repressive state regimes (Hefner 2001; Eickelman and Salvatore 2002). These analyses, however, tend to neglect the spatial and material forms that mediate public presence and participation. In the situation examined here, the specific form of visibility that Alevi rituals have attained has led to a deferral of the political adjudication of communal differences. Far from simply making use of the public sphere for political agitation, many Alevi actors increasingly express unease about the social and political effects of the visibility they have acquired. Taking such expressions of anxiety as a starting point, this essay offers a historical and ethnographic account of Alevi visibility in an effort at conceptualizing the aesthetic mediations of pluralist politics.

Kurdish Alevis, linguistic distinctions can be drawn between Zaza and Kurmanji speakers. Among Turkish Alevis, tribal and regional affiliations can be highlighted, such as the ritual variations that obtain between the Tahtacıs of Southwestern Anatolia and Alevis from central Anatolia. In using the phrase "Turkey's Alevis," I do not mean to restrict the analysis to ethnically Turkish members of the Alevi community, but instead refer simply to those within the Turkish nation-state that identify as Alevi. Indeed, there are Kurdish as well as ethnically Turkish members of the Alevi community described in this essay.

[3] Only the relatively small populations of Christians and Jews are recognized as official minorities of the state.

INVOCATIONS OF PLURALISM

With the rise of identity politics in Turkey, as elsewhere, intellectuals, journalists, politicians, and social movements have begun to query the possibilities of pluralism in relation to the limits of the cultural and political imaginaries of the nation. Contemporary Alevi mobilizations figure prominently in debates about Turkish pluralism. Some commentators have referred to an "Alevi awakening" in order to describe the construction of new Alevi organizations, the production of a new wave of publications, and the development of new claims made on the state on the basis of a communal identity (Çamuroğlu 2005; Ocak 1996). The Alevi awakening has come to be viewed as one piece of a broader political-economic liberalization that has posed a challenge to the hegemony of Turkish nationalism (Yavuz 2003).

At the heart of debates over the Alevi awakening sits the *ayin-i cem*, or *cem* for short, a central ritual practice within Turkey's Alevi community. It functions as a rite of initiation for adolescents, as a commemoration ritual for revered figures in early Islamic history, and as a site for the adjudication of social disputes among members of the community. For several centuries, the Alevi *cem* was performed in gatherings explicitly closed off to outsiders and foreigners. Long held as a private, communal affair, the *cem* has gained unprecedented public exposure in the past several decades.

During the course of my fieldwork in Turkey, I was invited to attend a number of *cem* ceremonies, the fact of which was itself indicative of the new publicity of Alevi practices.[4] While in attendance, I was often able to correlate the unfolding series of ritual events with the practices that I had read about in ethnographic accounts of the community: the chanting of hymns about revered figures, a cantillation that recounts the ascension of the Prophet to heaven, the performance of religious dances, the recitation of the singularity of God (*tevhid*), and sacrificial offerings to God.

At one such *cem* ceremony, I witnessed a moment that interrupted the formulaic steps of the ritual's typical progression. The event took place in a relatively nondescript, three-story building, itself located within a predominantly Alevi neighborhood of a central Anatolian town. The room in which the ritual was conducted was spacious, capable of holding several hundred participants. At this particular event, women and men sat on separate sides of the room, leaving a narrow gap between them, which constituted the ritually demarcated center, or *meydan*. Toward the conclusion of the *cem*, a group of ten adolescents entered the *meydan*. They arrived in order to participate in the ceremony, specifically for the sake of performing the *semah*, a practice constituted by a series of prescribed rhythmical movements, usually set to the recitation of a

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[4] My ethnographic research was conducted between 2005 and 2007, largely in the nation's capital Ankara and in the provincial Anatolian town of Çorum.

devotional hymn, and which constitutes a part of the *cem*. The youth group's desire to perform a *semah* in this ritual context was not out of place, and indeed a version of the practice had been enacted earlier in that very *cem*. However, the religious leader conducting the ritual, known as a *dede*, was troubled by the presence of this group of youngsters and began to reprimand them. "The *cem* is a form of worship (*ibadet*)," the *dede* declared. "This is not a stage for the performance of folklore (*folklor*)." The *dede* ultimately relented and allowed the group to perform the *semah*, but only after repeating that the performance was not a part of the act of worship for which they had congregated.

The claim that the *cem* is a form of worship has become a rallying cry for Alevi social movements. Were the state to authorize Alevi ritual as worship, Alevi organizations that establish sites of ritual practice would be eligible for tax exemptions and possibly for state funds.[5] Concerns for recognition, in other words, have been linked to demands for a more equitable distribution of resources. The Turkish state, however, has consistently maintained that the only site of worship for Muslims is the mosque, an assertion that many Alevis consider as evidence of discrimination against their community.

In this struggle, Alevi groups have found supporters both within Turkey and abroad. The European Commission's annual report on Turkey's EU accession status regularly includes a discussion of the Turkish state's ongoing failure to adequately recognize Alevi ritual. In its discussion of undue constraints placed on the freedom of religion, the most recent report mentions that *cemevis*—sites for the performance of the *cem*—are "not recognized as places of worship and, as a result, receive no funding from authorities" (European Commission 2008: 19). In a similar vein, a popular Turkish musician, Zülfü Livaneli, published a critical commentary in a national daily about the state's unwillingness to view the *cem* as a form of worship. "Our Alevi citizens can open a *cemevi* as a 'social and cultural association' but not as a 'place of worship' (*ibadet yeri*). As this situation is contrary to human rights and to democracy, it is probably not necessary to state that it is also contrary to the principle of secularism" (Livaneli 2005: 6).[6] The concern for Livaneli, as for the European Commission, is that the Turkish state systematically misrecognizes Alevi ritual, and consequently places material constraints on its expression.

Returning to the ritual scene depicted above, the *dede*'s reprimand of the youth group gave voice to a debate taking place among Alevis, their supporters, and the state, but in the context of the ritual practice itself, his critique was

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[5] It is worth noting that not all Alevi organizations seek state recognition in this manner. Some have openly called for the closing down of the state's Directorate of Religious Affairs, arguing that no religion ought to receive funding from state coffers.

[6] All translations from published Turkish texts are mine, unless otherwise noted.

directed at adolescents within the community. No one in attendance claimed that the *cem* is a piece of folklore rather than of worship, but the possibility of this interpretation haunted the scene nonetheless. In the context of ritual performance, the distinction of folklore and worship is rarely a matter of explicit linguistic designation, subjected to political dispute; the moral force of this distinction, I suggest, resides in the aesthetics of the performance itself.[7]

The *dede*'s critique addressed what he perceived to be the social form that the youth group typified. This particular ensemble of adolescents bore the marks of many other such groups in Turkey. They constituted what has come to be called a *semah* group (*semah ekibi*). Such groups are recognizable by certain characteristic traits: they are constituted by adolescents, wear distinctive costumes, rehearse their musical and dance routines in after-school programs, and only perform certain dances such as the *semah*, rather than the entirety of the ritual progression that constitutes a *cem*. *Semah* groups perform at a diverse array of venues, which include not only *cem* ceremonies such as the one I attended, but summer festivals, celebrations for the opening of new businesses, and gatherings for political parties. By virtue of this wide circulation, *semah* groups constitute one of the primary mechanisms by which Alevi rituals have generated a public audience. They are a central element of what some analysts refer to as the process by which Alevism has transformed from a secretive, esoteric cult into a "public religion." Yet it is this very circulation that created tensions for the *dede* described above. As we will see below, the circulation of *semah* groups into settings like festivals and political gatherings is authorized by ascriptions of the rubric of national folklore to the dance. Removed from the context of communal ritual, the *semah* performed by such youth groups is sanctioned by bureaucrats, industrial businessmen, and party officials as an element of the national heritage.

Many Alevis maintain an ambivalent attitude toward the youth groups and their *semah*. On the one hand, these sorts of groups provide a site in which Alevi youth learn the traditions of their community in an urban environment far removed from their families' villages of origin. Perhaps more importantly, the performances of such groups have enabled Alevis to represent their community in public domains, sparking debates over the recognition of communal differences that have been taken up by domestic celebrities and international agencies. On the other hand, the publicity of the *semah*, as performed by these youth groups, is contingent on being recognizable as a type of national

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[7] See Mandel (2008: 283) for a comparable example of a *cem* event in Germany, in which a *dede* critiqued the aesthetics of performance styles pursued by particular participants. In that specific case, which took place in the 1980s, the issue concerned the political connotations of songs composed by the sixteenth-century bard Pir Sultan Abdal, a figure celebrated by many Alevi leftists. Mandel notes that in the two decades that have passed since she witnessed the ritual, German Alevis have come to commonly and publicly stage the *cem* as a "folklorized performance."

folklore rather than as a form of communal worship. The forms of public visibility attained by Alevi organizations are hinged, paradoxically, to the category of folklore that Alevi movements are seeking to challenge. If the emergence of Alevi religious practice into public view poses a pluralist challenge to the Turkish state's efforts at defining and controlling the religious expressions of its citizenry in singular terms, this very visibility has been justified, legitimated, and sanctioned by discourses that re-inscribe a unitary vision of the nation.

The debate over the ritual status of the Alevi *cem* represents a primary site in which the politics of pluralism has been asserted within Turkey. These invocations of pluralism stretch across the conventional separation of public argument and private religious performance, incorporating explicit deliberative reason and aesthetic anxieties alike. In the remainder of this essay, I explore the contingent conjunctures that have obtained between public deliberation and ritual aesthetics. I proceed by first sketching the historical development of discourses of identity recognition in Turkey, before turning to a discussion of the emergence of an aesthetics of ritual visibility. Efforts to politicize communal differences under the sign of pluralism contend as much with the historical forces constitutive of the latter as with the terms of discourse precipitated out of the former.

TAMING DIFFERENCES

José Casanova (1994: 58) argues that one of the reasons that a religion enters the public sphere is to "protect the traditional life-world from administrative or judicial state penetration, and in the process [to open] up issues of norm and will formation to the public and collective self-reflection of modern discursive ethics." In this account, the entry of a religion into public visibility potentially widens the scope of public deliberation and expands the sites of political disputation about the common good. Hefner similarly describes certain forms of public religion in the contemporary Muslim world, which have repudiated both the establishment of an Islamic state and the relegation of religion to the private domain. These modes of rendering religion public, Hefner argues, have worked "with, rather than against, the pluralizing realities of our age" (2000: 220).

The rise of a public Alevi religion in Turkey in the past several decades has been interpreted in an analogous fashion. Ellington, for example, explains that "the process of urbanization and modernization in Turkey, far from weakening the public expression of religion, has invited an ever more vigorous demand for the recognition of religious rights from Turkey's diverse populations" (2004: 399). Yavuz adds that public expressions of Alevi religion have drawn upon "new communication networks," resulting in increasing Alevi participation in public debate and in a concomitant pluralization of political discourse (2003).

These analyses present an important critique of older theories of moderniz-ation that presumed the incompatibility of public expressions of religion with democratic politics. The "de-privatization" of a religion, in these assessments, fosters pluralist political possibilities. However, such efforts to rethink public religion often overlook the specific mediations that license displays of public visibility.[8] Not all signs, practices, or speech acts claiming to represent commu-nal plurality necessarily challenge the presumed homogeneity of the national body. Indeed, as indicated above, public representations of Alevism have often been represented under the sign of the nation itself.

The political philosopher Chantal Mouffe appears to place her understanding of pluralism upon different conceptual ground. Foregrounding the hegemonic dimensions of discursive practice, Mouffe argues that pluralist politics is con-strained rather than promoted by procedures that encourage the reconciliation of differences through the achievement of reasoned consensus.[9] According to Mouffe, pluralism cannot overcome conflict, but it can refashion it by trans-forming violent antagonisms between social constituencies into agonistic dis-putes, waged in political arenas. Pluralist politics "helps us to envisage how the dimension of antagonism can be 'tamed'" (2005: 20). When antagonism is tamed, "agonistic legitimate political channels for dissenting voices exist" (ibid.: 21). The taming of differences in a pluralist regime is what allows for political rather than violent expressions of conflict.

Yet for Mouffe, as for scholars of public religion more enthusiastic about consensual deliberative politics, what remains unexamined is the determination of the channels capable of funneling disputes in a legitimate fashion—a deter-mination, I would insist, that is not simply a problem for political theory to resolve but one that demands a historical analysis. The processes and practices that tame conflict can also function to de-politicize disputes.[10] If transforming violent conflict into political dispute is a central task of pluralism, the quelling of antagonisms can also have a converse effect, namely, removing conflict from sites of political adjudication. Pluralism hinges on the multiple consequences of any project of taming conflict.

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[8] For a valuable discussion of the socio-political processes involved in stabilizing certain rep-resentations for public display, see Shryock 2004. Importantly, Shryock argues that ethnographers ought to interrogate the "zones of intimacy" that alternately provide "relief from, alternatives to, and staging grounds for the representation of a fairly narrow spectrum of cultural materials and practices that, in an age of identity politics, must inevitably be shown" (2004: 12).

[9] Note, in this regard, that Mouffe (2005: 83–89) critiques Habermas' (1998) rationalist con-ception of liberal democracy for failing to contend with the forms of hegemony presupposed by communicative practices.

[10] See Brown 2006 for a discussion of the ways in which the discourses of multiculturalism and of tolerance have had depoliticizing effects. Brown writes, "Depoliticization involves removing a political phenomenon from comprehension of its historical emergence and from a recognition of the powers that produce and contour it" (2006: 15).

The ambiguities of pluralism are particularly evident in Turkey, in which the national identity is, as Neyzi argues, "Janus-faced": it is "defined in terms of a commitment to secular modernist values on the part of the citizens of Turkey," on the one hand, and yet it is understood to be organized in terms of "a single language and a single imagined ethnicity associated with a particular religious heritage," on the other (2002: 140). Similarly Bozarslan (2002) maintains that at its inception, the secular Turkish nation-state established Sunni Islam—the religious identification of the majority of the population—as the *de facto* religion of the nation.[11] While the Janus-faced character of Turkish nationalism has spawned socio-political fractures since the birth of the republic in 1923, the political tensions of cultural plurality intensified in the aftermath of the Second World War, with the large-scale migration of predominantly rural Alevi populations into urban settings. As urbanizing Alevis began to share in material resources with the Sunni majority—resources from which they had been previously excluded—issues related to political and economic distribution across sects emerged as a problem of governance. Bozarslan suggests that in the second half of the twentieth century the increasing presence of Alevis in the urban milieu raised challenges to the institutionalized confluence that had long obtained between Sunni Islam and imaginaries of the Turkish nation.

The state began to face significant challenges in relation to communal plurality with the eruption of sectarian discord in the second half of the twentieth century. In the 1970s, Turkey witnessed an escalation in civil violence—between leftist and right-wing groups and across sectarian and ethnic divisions. By the end of the decade, in cities across central and eastern Anatolia such as Maraş, Malatya, Sivas, and Çorum, Alevi communities fell victim to practices of systemic discrimination, harassment, and ultimately violence. Overt sectarian conflict was brought to an end only by the military coup in 1980 and the period of martial law that it initiated.

Following the coup, issues of sectarian division cooled considerably. Indeed, urban Alevi intellectuals in the post-coup era began to write openly about their religious identity, and through the 1990s Alevi organizations rapidly emerged and expanded, providing sites of communal ritual expression in cities across Anatolia. Moreover, such organizations began to exploit new communicative

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[11] The constitutive contradiction at the heart of the modern Turkish nation-state—between universal citizenship and a *de facto* establishment of majoritarian conceptions of Islam—is not meant to indicate that Sunni Muslim communities have uniformly or readily assented to statist forms of religious organization. Recent research has demonstrated the variety of ethical and religious practices found among Sunni Muslims in contemporary Turkey, many of which operate outside of the state's institutional supervision (Çınar 2005; Henkel 2007; Silverstein 2008). Despite the fact that many Sunni groups have contested the form of Islam organized by the state, from the perspective of many Alevis the state's efforts at training preachers, supervising mosques, and vetting Friday sermons index a privileging of religious forms derived from the Sunni tradition.

media, such as private radio, television channels, and the internet, in order to give public voice to Alevi communal concerns (Vorhoff 1998; Şahin 2005).

Between the 1970s and the 1990s, what we see in Turkey is the transformation of antagonistic violence between sects into legitimized expressions of public religion.[12] It is important, however, to interrogate more closely the extent to which this process has facilitated a political contest about communal differences. Unlike ethno-national Kurdish movements in Turkey, which have produced calls for a separate sovereign state, and unlike Islamist movements, which have motivated the establishment of distinct Turkish political parties, Alevi movements have, with few exceptions, rarely taken overt political form. More often than not, Alevi organizations have explicitly distanced themselves from movements that seek to challenge the sovereignty of the state or the foundational principles of the secular Republic.

The Alevi community does not owe its contemporary public visibility to the successful transformation of violent antagonism into political agonism. To the contrary, the entry of Alevis into public spaces of deliberation in the 1980s was mediated by a newly inclusive rhetoric of right-wing political groups, such as the Nationalist Movement Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, MHP). Such groups began to court the Alevi community—a position that was an about-face from the prior decade, when they were involved in mobilizing violence against Alevis. Bora and Can (2004: 486) suggest that the efforts of these parties were aimed at "integrating Alevism into their ideologies and politics." Members of the MHP and intellectuals associated with it began to assert the Turkic character of Alevi religious belief, valorizing Alevism for its purported racial and cultural ties to the Turkish nation. In the present day, representatives of political parties across the ideological spectrum appear at Alevi festivals, and often sponsor public performances of Alevi rituals. This staging of national inclusion has provided a modality of legitimacy for many Alevi organizations. As Massicard (2006) reveals, the single most prominent concept deployed by Alevi groups since the late 1980s was that of "the Unity of the Nation."[13]

The incorporation of Alevism into the historiography of the Turkish nation itself has a history, starting with assertions by nationalist ideologues in the 1920s and 1930s. Recuperated in the late twentieth century by Alevi and non-

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[12] I should be clear that the development of legitimized forms of Alevi public religion has not transpired without conflict. Indeed, violent conflict has not abated altogether in the post-1980 period. Episodes of violence in Sivas in 1993 and in Istanbul in 1995 were largely directed against Alevi populations. In speaking of a taming of conflict through the sanctioning of certain forms of public expression, I mean to describe a process that is neither permanent nor unequivocally achieved, but ongoing, uneven, and subject to possible disruption.

[13] The ideological force of such slogans was due in part to the fact that, at the same moment, the Turkish state was involved in an ongoing war with separatist Kurdish guerilla groups in the southeast of the country. In that context, "unity of the nation" refers not only to a sense of the common good but also to a more aggressive sense of guarding the nation against perceived threats to its indivisibility. I thank Kelda Jamison for highlighting this point.

Alevi intellectuals alike, this thesis was rapidly incorporated in official policy, as officials from the state's Directorate of Religious Affairs began, in the 1990s, to proclaim that Alevism has contributed to the richness of Turkey's cultural history. In a revealing interview, conducted in a journal predominantly concerned with Alevi issues, the head of the Directorate of Religious Affairs, Ali Bardakoğlu, was asked about the religious status of the *cemevi*, urban centers where Alevis have begun sponsoring and performing the *cem* ritual. Bardakoğlu responded, "According to Islam, according to true knowledge of Islam, the *cemevi* is not a place of worship (*ibadet yeri*) and the supplications and the *cem* ritual that are performed in the *cemevi* are not a kind of worship (*ibadet*) that resembles daily worship (*namaz*) or fasting. But it is a good form of behavior (*davranış*), it is an activity that must be kept alive" (Gültekin and Işık 2005: 10). Characteristically, he expresses his approval of the *cem* only on the condition that it not be considered worship. The term used by Bardako-ğlu to characterize the *cem*, behavior (*davranış*), leaves ambiguous the ritual status of the practice. The interviewers continue to push Bardakoğlu on this matter, forcing him to specify further what the *cem* amounts to. He responds: "Never in our history has the *cemevi* been an alternative to a mosque or vice versa. They existed together, but the mosque existed as a place of worship, while *cemevis* were places of culture (*kültür evleri*) in which the traditions of a group within Islam flourished" (ibid.: 11). Asserting that Alevi sites of ritual are cultural or folkloric is one manner in which state officials have come to incorporate, or tame, communal differences within a singular conception of the nation. At the moment when Alevis were emerging into public visibility, potentially challenging the *de facto* institutional understanding of Turkish nationalism, Alevism itself was coming to be defined by political parties and by the state as an element of the nation's culture and history.

A useful point of comparison can be found in Étienne Balibar's recent discussion of multiculturalism in Europe. Balibar argues that the multicultural problem "stems from the fact that a given linguistic, religious, geographical, or historical identity is not officially considered to be one of the 'legitimate mediations' of … national identity" (2004: 29). From this perspective, the emergence of communal differences into public spaces does not, in and of itself, threaten the unitary vision of belonging enforced by the nation-state. Rather, the issue of pluralism emerges in relation to *how* such differences are brought into public view. The taming of communal differences within an ideological imaginary of the nation can be one manner of preventing, rather than consolidating, the emergence of a pluralist politics.

Since the late 1980s, debates about sectarian differences have focused on precisely the question of whether and in what manner Alevism functions as a "legitimate mediation" of Turkish national identity. Efforts by Alevis to create a space of communal identification that does not, ultimately, cohere with historical and religious imaginaries of the nation have continuously

confronted accusations of divisiveness. By insisting that Alevism mediates national identity as a form of culture or folklore, state officials and certain political parties have de-politicized communal differences. They have deferred the problem of a pluralist politics just at the moment when Alevi groups have sought to bring communal differences into sites of public and political deliberation. What we are witnessing is not merely a political struggle between Alevis and the state, but a struggle over whether such communal differences ought to be made subject to political deliberation at all.

AESTHETIC HISTORIES

The extensive public debates currently underway in Turkey about the administrative classification of Alevi ritual might tempt us to locate the vibrancy of politics primarily in realms of deliberative argument. Thus conceived, social and political actors conceptualize and dispute the categorization of the ritual independent of any materialization of the practice itself—a materialization that therefore remains only arbitrarily bound to the classificatory schemas under critical scrutiny. However, I would caution against an understanding of the politics of dispute that ignores the specific economies of sound and gesture that give material form to the practices being debated. The discursive intelligibility of the ritual—that is, the classification of the practice through categories that allow commentators to explain or debate its meaning and function—is crucially contingent upon the genres of music and dance that make it "publicly accessible" and perceptible to social actors (Urban 1996). The aesthetics of the ritual's public form is not, in other words, epiphenomenal to its signifying potential.

In order to deepen our understanding of the tensions that obtain between pluralism and the public mediation of sectarian differences, it is important to explore how efforts to motivate a pluralist politics, that is, a political adjudication of communal differences, have been stalled rather than motivated by the ritual's public accessibility. The unease expressed by the *dede* described above regarding the form of ritual practice that has achieved public visibility is not adequately explained by recourse to a history of state ideologies and the late ascendancy of movements to counteract them. As I have emphasized, the *dede*'s criticism was directed not at the restrictions on communal expression levied by the state but at the spatial and material forms of expression that have achieved public visibility. The tensions that I am attempting to explore result from a history of aesthetics that is only partly coincident with the discursive-ideological history often recounted in discussions of social movements that contest administrative and legal policy.

In the 1970s, a full decade before Alevi religious practices became part of overt public debate, selected aspects of the *cem* had already found a public audience. Specifically, the *semah* was established and performed as a genre of folk dance, autonomous from its embedding in the act of worship. By the

late 1980s, when communal identities came to the political fore, the ritual forms capable of representing Alevi identity had been in public circulation for a decade. The *semah*, if not the *cem*, was already publicly recognizable in a specific set of contexts and through a particular manner of performance. The extraction of the *semah* from the ritual context of the *cem* points to what I am calling an aesthetic history, in which the communal practice that eventually would be taken up in the project of becoming a public religion was initially established as a recognizable social form and authorized for performance in specific styles and sites. The question raised by an interrogation of aesthetics is how the *semah* came to be construable through a genre of performance independent of the ritual that had long provided it with function and meaning.

It should be clear that I conceive of aesthetics as a category with historical, rather than strictly literary-artistic, purchase.[14] The history I have in mind does not refer to the origins of ritual forms such as the *cem* or the *semah*, which extend back several centuries. Institutions and performance contexts that emerge only in the modern era sustain the contemporary practice of such rituals. Yet the aesthetic history of the *semah* must also not be defined in terms of a "symbolic politics," in which claims to tradition are formulated for the tactical achievement of present-day political aims (Eickelman and Piscatori 1996). Viewing *semah* performances as tactical usefully highlights the institutional resources and forms of recognition that assertions of communal identity potentially mobilize, but this analytical frame obscures the fact that the *semah* had already attained many of its characteristic modalities of public visibility in the decade that preceded the widespread rise of identity politics in Turkey. The form of the ritual's visibility is inherited rather than invented by contemporary Alevi actors.

A "social aesthetics," as Seremetakis (1994) terms it, concerns the historically evolving repertoire of social, spatial, and material forms that constrain and constitute the signification of the practice they mediate.[15] In this regard, the intelligibility of a practice is neither fixed in advance of its enactment nor simply open to tactical manipulation—either such formulation relies on an

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[14] Buck-Morss argues that the restriction of "aesthetics" to concerns about art is in fact a relatively recent transformation of the concept. In a longer historical view, aesthetics has referred to the "sensory experience of perception" (1992: 6). Eagleton (1990) subtly navigates the long and embattled conceptual trajectory of the concept of the aesthetic in modern European thought by identifying a central contradiction at the heart of these discourses: the aesthetic, within this field of debate, was seen to provide a ground for moral and political order in sensory experience, which was conceived of as universal and available to projects of political hegemony; yet sense perception relies irreducibly on concrete embodied experiences, given to impulses that might motivate resistance to the agendas of governing authorities. As explained below, my effort at appropriating the concept of the aesthetic draws on contemporary anthropological efforts at conceptualizing the socio-historical specificity and mutability of any articulation of meaning, materiality, and sensibility.

[15] See also Larkin's (2008) recent analysis of the social effects of distortion in media production in Nigeria. The study highlights the material conditions of meaningful communication.

impoverished conception of aesthetic mediation, reducing its referential scope to the arbitrary external garb through which a meaning is conveyed.[16] Later in this essay I will demonstrate that the aesthetic mediations of contemporary *semah* performances are not empirically isolable from the signifying effects achieved by the practice: such mediations animate styles of participation, sociability, and spectatorship. Gaonkar and Povinelli similarly argue that, when conceptualized in terms of their spatial forms and material textures, cultural practices can be seen to "entail, demand, seduce, intoxicate, and materialize rather than simply mean" (2003: 395). In speaking of the aesthetics of Alevi visibility, I mean to highlight the shifting spatio-material parameters of public performance that enable participants and audiences to experience the community's practices as pleasurable, tolerable, or distasteful.

   An aesthetic history, as I seek to understand it, is shaped by what Keane (1997) describes as the vicissitudes of a ritual's representational media. The transformations, stabilizations, and disruptions to which such mediatory forms are prone provoke moral and political anxieties irreducible to the meanings the ritual is said to symbolize (see also Tambar 2009). The unease aroused by the visibility of the practice, I submit, cannot always be redressed through criticism of the ritual's reflexive classification alone. Such anxieties concern the sensibilities and social expectations that have come to shape the performance and consumption of the practice.

   Further below I will elaborate on how an account of the aesthetics of visibility alters an understanding of pluralist politics, but here I seek to excavate the aesthetic history constitutive of contemporary *semah* performances. According to Öztürkmen (2005), the *semah* began to be treated as a practice unto itself, circulating autonomously of the *cem* ritual, in the 1970s. At that time, it was taught at Boğaziçi University as one of the dances in the repertoire of the university's nationally renowned folklore club. The *semah* became a dance that could be performed by Alevis and non-Alevis alike, staged not as a mode of communally specific worship but as a form of national folklore. The *semah* had come to be viewed as part of an expanding number of dances included in domestic and international folklore competitions. The value and function of the dance were no longer dependent on the context of the *cem*.

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[16] Meyer (2008) offers a valuable discussion of aesthetics in the study of contemporary religious movements. Importantly, Meyer develops her understanding of aesthetics by critiquing symbolic or interpretive approaches—approaches, she suggests, that often presuppose an understanding of religious signs only arbitrarily connected to their referents. Meyer argues for an understanding of aesthetics that enables a conceptualization of the material and sensory dimensions of religious subjectivities. Note, however, that where Meyer focuses on the forms of sensory experience cultivated within particular religious traditions—a "religious aesthetics," as she terms it—this essay describes aesthetic mediations that establish the conditions of possibility for designating what counts as a "religious" experience at all.

While the state has promoted folk dancing for much of Republican history, folklore clubs were granted a new legitimacy in the 1970s. Reacting against the rising numbers of overtly political youth organizations in that decade, the state authorized folklore clubs as one of the few sites of legitimate youth sociability. Whereas the state frequently banned politicized youth groups, it continued to sponsor folklore clubs and competitions (Öztürkmen 2002). The state's efforts to create a form of sociability apart from political and militant activity were not entirely successful: many folklore clubs continued to maintain associations with political organizations.[17] Yet one result of the state's legitimation tactics was that the performance of the *semah* as a genre of folk dance not only removed it from any necessary connection with the *cem*, but also operated through the institutional sponsorship and sanction of the state.

Equally significant to the entry of Alevism into Turkish public life has been the role of state-run media in promoting traditional Alevi hymns as folk music. The state's Turkish Radio and Television, in the 1960s and 1970s, encouraged Alevis to render elements of their spiritual repertory in a form congruent with the state's image of a national listening audience.[18] As Markoff notes, ritual genres like the *düvaz* and the *mersiye*, which contain explicit references to the religious orientation that distinguishes Alevis from Sunnis, remained "forbidden outside the bounds of ritual" (1986: 50).[19] Hymns that were broadcast by state radio, by contrast, were cast as folklore, removed from the ritual context of the *cem*, and set into new contexts of national circulation. Supported by the state and sold in the private music market, Alevi hymns acquired public presence independently of the ritual act in which they were once inextricably embedded.

Performances of the *semah* in the 1970s preceded the era that most social scientists recognize as the period of pluralism and identity politics. These early efforts at staging the *semah* are, in a sense, discursively pre-historical—they established a social form that would serve the needs of a pluralist politics emergent only in a subsequent era. Yet, delimited as a species of folk dancing and inserted into an available and sanctioned form of social interaction, the social form that was thus consolidated carried the marks of the nation-state's authority, which would persist into the later period, initiating the paradoxes that inhere in contemporary Alevi pluralist projects. Attempts to invoke a pluralist politics confront their limits not only in the obstinacy of

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[17] I thank an anonymous reviewer of this essay for pointing out that the folklore club at Boğaziçi University maintained a reputation for radical leftist politics in the 1970s.

[18] On the idea that a listening audience needs to be produced, see Hirschkind 2006. He reveals how the construction of a nation-state in Egypt not only required legal and bureaucratic interventions but also reshaped the "sensory epistemologies" of the populace (2006: 41).

[19] The *düvaz* explicitly mention the spiritual exploits of the Twelve Imams, figures revered by Anatolian Alevis and the global Shia community. The *mersiye* focuses on the tragedies of the Battle of Karbala, in which Husayn—one of the Twelve Imams—was martyred.

state officials and the inadequacy of their designations but also in the aesthetics of visibility that has provided a public footing for Alevi ritual.

FORMS OF CIRCULATION

The encounter that I described between the *dede* and the youth group he reprimanded took place in 2006. By that point, performances of the *semah* in folk dance competitions and festivals had been in public circulation for nearly three decades. The *semah*-as-folk-dance represented by the youth group was easily and immediately discernible to the *dede*, as well as to most of the other participants in the *cem*.

What was recognizable to onlookers was the social form, or genre, typified by the youth group. Recent anthropological work inspired by the writings of Bakhtin has theorized the concept of genre less as a device for classifying texts and practices, and more as a property of social action itself (e.g., Bakhtin 1986; Hanks 1987; Crapanzano 1996; Bauman 1999). Genres are invoked to achieve social ends.

As Briggs and Bauman argue, one of the consequences of invoking a genre is the establishment of "indexical connections that extend far beyond the present setting of production or reception, thereby linking a particular act to other times, places, and persons" (1992: 147–48). The youth group's *semah* conjured, for performers as for observers, other contexts in which the dance has been enacted. An entire chain of iteration—of contexts, actors, and codings—came into view in the performance. Conceived in terms of its generic features, the *semah* is not only a form *in* circulation (the dance itself). It has required a distinctive form *of* circulation, which has shaped the channels of transmission, the various contexts of performance, and the sensibilities and expectations that attend to such contexts.[20]

As argued above, the aesthetic history of the *semah* has yielded a formation of Alevi ritual concordant with a national audience. Alevi efforts to raise a pluralist challenge to nationalist ideologies must contend not only with state designations of Alevi ritual but also with the sites, actors, and audiences precipitated out of the *semah*'s aesthetic history. The social form of the youth group's presentation—the genre they exemplified—elicited, for the *dede*, urban sites and performances associated with folklore. In order to provide a sense of the sociopolitical anxieties that attend to the aesthetics of the *semah*'s performance, I turn now to an ethnographic elucidation of the forms of circulation and the social expectations with which the practice has come to articulate.

In contrast to the *dede*'s critical dismissal of the *semah* group, Alevi intellectuals and organizations in the early 1990s did not immediately repudiate the coding of communal ritual as folklore. Having only just begun to assert their

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[20] On the semiotic and cultural processes of circulation, see Lee and LiPuma 2002; Gaonkar and Povinelli 2003; and Gal 2003.

cultural identity in public, the category of folklore provided a legitimate avenue of public recognition. The *semah*, we should recall, was already at that point an established social-folkloric form, made available through mass media and state sponsorship. Alevi organizations that were newly emerging as part of the "Alevi awakening" taught the *semah* to adolescents as a way of introducing urban youth to the community's traditions. The youth groups were recruited to perform the practice, not simply for the sake of participating in folklore competitions as in the 1970s, but as an explicit demonstration of communal identity in public spaces. Alevi organizations made use of the publicly available and sanctioned social genre, but as a manner of expressing communal distinction. Consolidated as an autonomous social form in the 1970s, the newly authorized *semah* underwent a transformation in the 1990s, being conceived as a public sign of both national folklore and Alevi community.[21]

The youth group I observed in 2006 imagined itself very much in terms of a broader communal struggle for public recognition. Several adolescents of the *semah* group explained to me that their performances are an important aspect of the "Alevi awakening." One member said that the performance of the *semah* in public arenas would not have been acceptable in the past, when Alevis were more overtly persecuted, but that in the present it is a vehicle through which Alevis can learn about and express their identity: "The *semah* allows us to announce, 'We are here!' (*biz buradayız*)."

This particular *semah* group was organized by a local neighborhood association in the central Anatolian town where I was conducting fieldwork. The association offers music lessons in the *saz* and *bağlama*, drawing courses, and drama lessons, in addition to teaching the *semah*.[22] Students in such courses are all between the ages of twelve and twenty-one. The association, in a sense, functions as an after-school program, in which adolescents participate in supervised activities with other kids their age and learn about Alevi traditions at the same time. Adolescents participating in the *semah* group meet weekly for rehearsals, learning the steps and movements of a number of different *semah* styles. While participants are aware that the different styles are drawn from a number of regionally distinctive traditions, taken from across central and eastern Anatolia, few are able to specify the particular origin of each style.

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[21] It is not surprising that several of the books published by Alevis as early contributions to the publicizing of communal identity focused on the *semah*, not simply as an element of the *cem* but as a topic in its own right (e.g., Bozkurt 1990; Erseven 1990). Such texts considered the *semah* as a historical product of Turkish history and conceptualized it as a form of folklore. Books about the *semah* presupposed that the dance existed as a social form whose historical meaning could be described independently of its role in the progression of the *cem*.

[22] The significance of the instrumentation must not be underestimated. On the symbolic and ethical importance of the *saz* and the *bağlama* in imaginaries of the Turkish nation, see Stokes 1992 and Bryant 2005.

The *semah* group performs not only in *cem* rituals but also at a number of different locations. I observed one performance outside of a grocery store that had recently opened. The owner of the market informed me that he wanted to generate publicity for the store. He saw the *semah* group as providing a kind of entertainment to attract customers. The *semah* was employed to summon a public audience of consumers, unmarked for sectarian affiliation.

The most common site in which the youth group participates is the summer village festival. Alevis who migrated to the town from nearby villages often sponsor festivals in the summer, primarily as a means of drawing family and friends back for a reunion in the natal environment. Importantly, larger variants of these festivals are often advertised in town through posters on storefronts, and frequently generate an audience that includes not only Alevis but Sunnis as well, an occasional politician in search of local support, and local journalists seeking to capture a photograph and to compose a brief caption. Such festivals are usually one-day affairs, involving barbecues and picnics. Often a musician will be hired to provide entertainment. *Semah* groups are also recruited for this task.

Generally, youth groups perform twice at a festival. The two performances differ in their content: one is referred to as a *halk oyunu* (literally, folk dance) and the other as the *semah*. The two are distinguishable by different forms of music, instrumentation, and costumes. The instruments in the *halk oyunu* include the *davul* and *zurna* (a percussive and wind instrument, respectively), as opposed to the *saz* (a lute) that is used in the *semah*. The *halk oyunu* is light-hearted. Dancers play out a narrative scenario in which several boys seek the affections of a girl. Dancing is accompanied by playful shouting, and participants frequently laugh with one another amidst the performance. The *semah*, by contrast, presents no such narrative. The demeanor of participants is more serious. As one performer mentioned to me, "We don't talk to each other when dancing the *semah*—we don't even smile."

For most members of the youth group, several of whose performances I attended, the distinction between the two dances was crucial. I was often told that the differences in instrumentation, clothing, and disposition point to distinctions between folk dancing and worship (*ibadet*) that concern the contextual sensibilities appropriate to each. The *davul* and *zurna* used in the *halk oyunu* are commonly employed in celebrations such as weddings. Their distinctive sounds carry connotations of levity.[23] The *semah*, by contrast, is accompanied by religious hymns (*nefes* and *deyiş*). When I asked several of the performers about the difference between the two dances, they each insisted that the *semah* is a form of worship, which needs to be performed with a gravity that is absent in the *halk oyunu*.

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[23] In some Sunni villages, music associated with the *davul* and *zurna* provokes controversy and is seen by some as leading to sinful forms of entertainment (Hart 2009).

However important this distinction between the two dances, a number of performers also insisted that such festivals are for entertainment (*eğlence*), and are therefore not conducive of acts of worship. One of the participants warned me against misconstruing the *semah*, which he insisted was in fact part of an act of worship, in terms of the ethos established by the contextual milieu of the festival. Participants, in this sense, sought to distinguish the essence of the ritual from the contexts in which they have come to perform it.

Such festivals hold out both a promise and a danger. They offer a site for the reproduction of Alevi traditions and enable the public display of communal rituals. As Soileau (2005) argues, festivals are among the most vibrant and widespread of sites where narratives of Alevi communal history are being consolidated and transmitted to younger generations. However, they also embed the community's ritual traditions within an aesthetics of visibility that most observers and participants find difficult to reconcile with the postures and dispositions of worship. The categories of folklore and worship are not simply competing discursive descriptions of Alevi ritual practices; they articulate with new institutional and social contexts, and the forms of sociability and engagement those contexts enable. The claim that the *semah* and the *cem* are practices of worship rather than forms of folklore or recreation increasingly contradicts the aesthetic conditions of legibility of their contexts of performance.

THE POLITICS OF VISIBILITY

A number of recent accounts of Islamic movements have emphasized the political consequences of religious movements acquiring public visibility. Göle, for instance, argues, "Islamic public visibility presents a critique of a secular version of the public sphere" (2002: 188). Çınar similarly assesses the politics of donning the headscarf in Turkish public spaces: "The headscarf has given an undeniable visibility and presence to Islam in the secular public sphere. It was the wearing of the headscarf in a particular manner that came to be recognized as the mark of an Islamist ideology, and its appearance not just anyplace, but on the university campus—a monumental space of modernity and secularism—made it an issue of public controversy" (2005: 84).

Veiling has gained "public visibility in ways that escape and undermine existing categories," thereby "subverting the authority and control of the secular public gaze" (Çınar 2005: 47). Wearing a headscarf is not only a sign of a gendered Muslim piety; the style ("wearing a headscarf in a particular manner") and site ("the university campus") of the performance are relatively stable indexes of a transgression of secularist norms. By attaining public visibility, veiling has acquired a political signification.

In contrast to the example of the veil, I have suggested that the aesthetics of the Alevi *semah*'s visibility has not overtly instigated a political challenge to the regnant categories of the nation enforced by the modernist state. The

domestication of Alevi ritual's public visibility presents a situation that allows us to pose questions that analyses of explicitly politicized practices, such as those concerned with veiling, have tended to foreclose: What are the conditions under which certain social practices systematically *fail* to effect political signification? How do the material and spatial contingencies of public performance enable or hinder political engagement? What are the aesthetic limits of political intelligibility?

Such issues are analytically pressing for an understanding of pluralism in contemporary Turkey, where many Alevis are beginning to question whether the public circulation of their rituals facilitates or disables a political challenge to nationalist designations of worship and folklore. A number of Alevis who I came to know in the course of my fieldwork were not persuaded by the youth group's efforts to tease out a distinction between the *semah*, as a practice of worship, and the festival in which it is performed, as a context of recreation. One Alevi friend, an elementary school teacher, expressed a criticism of these youth groups, arguing that the *semah* should not be performed outside of the *cem*. Offering me an example, he described being in a bar in a small town on the Aegean coast, when a popularized rendition of an Alevi hymn was played. A group of individuals spontaneously began to dance the *semah*. My friend is by no means religiously devout, but he was nonetheless taken aback by the spectacle. He concluded with some indignation, "The *semah* is a part of worship (*ibadet'in bir parçası*), and not a form of entertainment." While the *semah* he witnessed was not performed by a youth group, he saw in its enactment a similar dilemma: the *semah*, conceived as a genre unto itself, has attained a circulation through contexts of leisure and entertainment, which would not otherwise sustain a practice of worship. Indeed, the *semah* is visible in sites such as bars where performances of the *cem* would be incongruous and inappropriate.

Yet as I have been suggesting throughout this essay, this newfound visibility is not without its ambiguities. The teacher concluded his comments on an ambivalent note. He qualified his criticism, claiming that *semah* performances fulfill an important role in introducing Alevi rituals to a public audience that would otherwise have no exposure to the communal form. The *semah* enables a form of public recognition.

Such ambiguities become most apparent in the ordering and organization of *cem* ceremonies in urban settings. A crucial piece of the "Alevi awakening" has been the development of Alevi organizations in major metropolitan centers and in the provinces of central and eastern Anatolia. These organizations have provided local Alevi communities with spaces for communal ritual expression, which had previously only been available in rural settings. Most importantly, they have created urban spaces for Alevis to participate in *cem* rituals. In many such contexts, the *semah* figures prominently, featuring not merely as one element in the ritual's progression but also often as a public form inserted

into an intimate communal event. Indeed, the *semah* is frequently the portion of the ritual photographed by journalists and mentioned in news reports. Re-embedded within the *cem*, from which it had been extracted, the new genre of the *semah* has affected the legibility of Alevi religion in public discourse and the visibility of Alevi ritual in urban space.

While the sites created for the performance of the *cem* were designed in relation to ideas of its historical practice, several novel features imposed by the urban space have impacted the development of the ritual. First, the *cem* was often conducted in rural settings not only as a form of worship between the individual and God but also as a place of social adjudication, in which disputes between members of a village could be reconciled. The urban *cem*, by contrast, is open not only to those belonging to a single face-to-face interactive community, but also to Alevis of wide-ranging origin—from different villages, towns, and provinces. The new *cem* is ordered in relation to a distinctly urban stranger sociability.[24]

Second, the site of the *cem*, or the *cemevi*, is no longer simply any large, open space, as it was in rural areas. Rather, it is created in relationship to a specific institutional status. The emergence of Alevism as a "public religion" has taken place within the institutional context of Turkey's post-1980 political economy. Alevis were not the only community to seek public recognition in this period; so, too, did a large number of groups—women's groups, business groups, environmentalists, groups that represent migrants, Islamic organizations, and so forth. Such groups have organized under the rubric of civil society, which has involved taking on a particular status and conforming to its regulations.[25] Classed as foundations, Alevi institutions and the *cemevis* they support are not, for instance, eligible for tax exemptions, as are mosques, which are governed by a distinct ministry of state. This particular material concern is, however, but one materialization of a broader issue: contemporary *cemevis* are not simply new spaces for hosting essentially the same ritual; rather, the ritual itself is being constituted through new modes of engagement.

Third, whereas access to rural *cems* was often restricted to members of the proximate village community, the urban *cem* sustains a public presence. Foreign researchers, curious Sunnis, and occasional journalists are common, and are by now expected spectators at such events. The urban *cem* operates

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[24] Erdemir makes a similar point in his discussion of the urban *cem* ceremony: "In urban *cemevis*, it was no longer possible to recreate the exclusivity or the social intimacy one would find in village ceremonies. The anonymity of the crowd in cities transformed Alevi worship from an intimate gathering with family, relatives, and fellow villagers, into a crowded ceremony with suspicious strangers" (2005: 945).

[25] Generally, civil society groups either adopt the status of *vakıf* or *dernek*. A *vakıf* is an association based on an allotment of property rather than membership, whereas a *dernek* is formed by a group of individuals, organized around a common purpose or interest. For more detail on this distinction, see White 2002: 200–1.

not only according to the ritual functions sought out by local Alevis but also for the sake of representing Alevism on a public stage and dispelling disparaging myths about the community.[26]

Arranging the *cem* within the conditions of stranger sociability, modern institutionality, and urban publicity, Alevi organizations in the early 1990s drew upon the form of the *semah* that had been rendered recognizable since the 1970s. Conducting ethnographic research in 1994 among the Alevis of Hatay, Martin Stokes describes the scene of an urban *cem* that he attended:

> The *cem* that I observed was dominated by *semah* and by *deyiş*. The former is a dance, and the latter songs from a spiritual repertory. . . . As opposed to a communal ritual in which everybody takes place, the dance movements of the *semah* were carried out by a group of young men and women. There was a certain emphasis upon uniformity: the young people were, in effect, rehearsing the dance as a performance to be observed by others. Who these others were to be was not entirely clear, either to me, or to those who were attending, with me, for the first time. "Is this folklore (*folklor*) or a real *cem*? I mean can anybody join in as the mood takes them?" I heard one elderly visiting *dede* ask the musician (1996: 196–97).

The *semah* plays a crucial role in this *cem*. The movements of the dance, the age restrictions on participants, and the rehearsed quality of the performance serve as aesthetic cues of the *semah*'s social genre, carrying the traces of its circulation. They trigger a set of associations and contexts that shape the ethos of the *cem* as a whole. If the invoked *semah* grants a degree of legitimacy to the *cem*'s public presentation, it is due largely to the social form that the *dede* recognizes as bearing the marks of folklore. The aesthetic cues of the performance recall what was by then a twenty-year-old genre of folk dancing.

In the *cem* that I observed in 2006, the *dede* posed the problem of folklore in an assertive, critical tone rather than as a question. His reprimand was sharp. In the days following that *cem*, I visited with a number of elderly individuals who had attended the ritual, asking them what they thought of the *dede*'s criticism of the *semah* group. With little hesitation, several unequivocally agreed with the *dede*. One woman offered the following explanation: "The youth group arrived late. So they didn't participate in the whole *cem*. They only came to the *cem* in order to perform a folklore dance." Another man concurred that the adolescents did not sit in the *cem*, and as a result did not have the proper concentration that would have come from participating in the entire length of the ritual. He concluded that the group did not perform the *semah* as a form of worship.

Some of these criticisms point to correctable contingencies in the youth group's behavior, such as the late arrival and the failure to participate in other segments of the ritual. Yet the ascription of folklore to the group's

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[26] Perhaps the most widespread and pernicious myth refers to the idea that Alevis partake in incestuous orgies after extinguishing candles in the *cem* ritual. A number of Alevi interlocutors informed me that, on occasion, Sunni co-workers and classmates had confronted them with this particular accusation. Public presentations of the *cem* are meant, in part, to refute this myth.

performance also suggests recognition of a more systemic problem with the form of their dance. The men and women attending the *cem* discerned in the youth group's performance the modes of public visibility that have authorized a rendition of Alevi ritual as a form of folk dancing.

Several characteristics of the youth group marked it as a token of this genre, features which were most apparent when contrasted to a version of the *semah* that had been performed earlier that night. The earlier *semah* was performed by several elderly men and women, each wearing their quotidian clothing rather than costumes. Their *semah* took place within the unfolding progression of the *cem*. By contrast, the youth group did not include anyone above the age of twenty-one, they wore specially designed outfits that distinguished them from the rest of the individuals in attendance, and their performance occurred at the conclusion of the ritual rather than within it. Each of these elements served to create a staging effect that distinguished performer from onlooker in terms of participant and spectator. For the duration of the youth group's performance, attendees in the *cem* found themselves viewing a show as members of an audience—the same performance, in fact, that they might view in a summer festival or at a publicity event for a grocery store—rather than participating in a communal act of worship.

The sense that one is viewing a show and being entertained recalls the other contexts of the youth group's circulation. The distinctiveness of the youth group's performance genre was discernible in the disjuncture between the ethos of recreation conjured by those contexts and the solemnity of worship that participants in the *cem* sought to establish. This mode of performing the *semah* is not easy to construe in abstraction from the festivals in which it is most often enacted. Entering the context of the *cem*, the youth group was criticized by many attendees for bringing the sensibilities of the festival into an arena of worship. In effect, their performance carried the risk of re-contextualizing the practice of the *cem* itself through the aesthetics of the *semah*'s public visibility.

The urban *cem* reveals the difficulties faced by contemporary Alevi communities in seeking to invoke a politics of pluralism. Efforts to organize the ritual in urban spaces are often motivated by a concern to offer communal representation in a milieu that has been historically hostile to its ritual forms. Performances of urban *cems* are, in this sense, assertions of communal distinction in contrast to the unmarked yet institutionally supported modes of majoritarian religious worship. The element of the *cem* that has most successfully traversed public space in Turkey is the *semah*. Yet its success in achieving public recognition is inextricably tied to an aesthetic history in which it came to be delimited as a piece of folk dancing and later embedded in various contexts of recreation and leisure. Alevi movements struggling to create spaces of communal worship not only discover opportunities but also encounter their limits in those practices that have achieved public visibility. The social form that has most prominently

facilitated the development of Alevism into a public religion simultaneously invokes an aesthetics of visibility that Alevi movements, in the name of pluralism, seek to contest.

CONCLUSION

In the past several decades, Turkey has witnessed a political and economic liberalization that, as with many other parts of the post-Cold War world, has threatened the long-held certainties of nationalism. Of the numerous examples that manifest this trend within Turkey, the emergence of Alevi movements presents both an exemplification and a limiting case. Newly established publishing houses, intellectuals, organizations, and ritual performances in public sites have remade the urban landscape in ways that pose challenges to the state's efforts at controlling religious practice. The Alevi awakening has compelled journalists, Islamic scholars, and state officials alike to reconsider the legitimacy of the plural religious allegiances held by the nation's citizenry.

While the sectarian rancor of a prior generation has been relatively stifled, the vehicles that have tamed communal conflict have not unambiguously led to a regime of pluralism, which would enable the political contestation of societal disputes. The consolidation of Alevism as a public religion has been mediated by an ideology of folklore that is authorized as derivative of the nation. The very processes that have instituted Alevism as a public religion have at once produced a pluralist challenge to Turkish nationalism *and* re-inscribed the nation into the forms of communal ritual.

In analyzing the paradoxes of pluralism, I have examined the limits of political engagement not only in explicit ideological debates, which take place in deliberative forums that are commonly viewed as signs of a robust public sphere. Rather, I have emphasized the aesthetic histories out of which the habits and expectations of public performance and spectatorship have been consolidated. Attempts to secure a conception of Alevi ritual as a form of worship contend not only with a field of debate over the ideological meanings ascribed to the practice but with an aesthetic history that cannot be addressed in deliberative discourse alone. Efforts by Alevi movements to challenge state designations of communal ritual as folkloric are compelled to challenge the visibilities that have enabled Alevism to become a public religion.

The ambivalence expressed by many Alevis with regard to the public visibility of their ritual traditions raises a set of questions for which there are, as yet, no ready answers: What might a challenge to the regnant regime of visibility entail? What kinds of action might facilitate this sort of contest? Such questions imply a critique of the institutional agencies that have sustained the visibilities available to the community. But they also point toward a critique of the very public presence by means of which Alevis can instigate public reflection upon these questions. The predicaments faced by contemporary Alevis indicate not simply an ongoing political struggle for rights and

recognition, but a battle over the sensibilities and habits through which public presence can be authenticated and on whose grounds politics can be waged. The publicity of Alevi religion has come to serve as both an index of pluralism in Turkey and the limit that pluralist projects struggle to overcome.

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