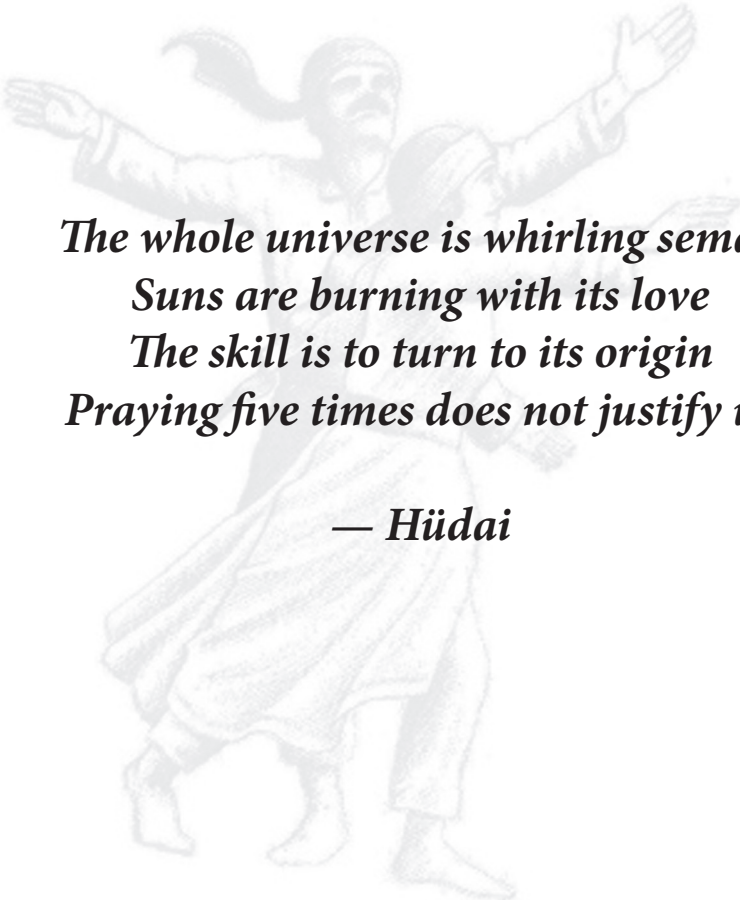




ALEVISM



SEMAH



*The whole universe is whirling semah
Suns are burning with its love
The skill is to turn to its origin
Praying five times does not justify us*

— Hüdai

Semah

Semah is one of the main twelve services of the cem rituals which are considered as religious practices by Alevi-Bektaşî-Kızılbaş adherents. It can be described as a set of mystical and aesthetic movements in rhythmic harmony performed by semahcis (semah dancers), accompanied by zakirs playing the saz (musical performers in cem rituals).

Semahs can be described as a set of mystical and aesthetic body movements in rhythmic harmony. They constitute one of the twelve main services found in Cem rituals, religious practices performed by adherents of Alevi-Bektaşî-Kızılbaş, a belief system nourished by a variety of beliefs and cultural sources. Alevism reached its maturity in Anatolia, Alevi Order has distinguished itself from mainstream Alevi belief system, with respect to its roots, formation processes and current cultural background. The Alevi belief system has been enhanced and cultivated by a great variety of beliefs and cultures in the history of Anatolia.

Semah performers are known as semahcis and they are accompanied by devout musicians playing the saz, a long-necked lute. Various forms of Semah exist in Alevi communities across the world, each with distinct musical characteristics and rhythmic structures. One consistent characteristic is the performance of the ritual by both men and women, side by side. Semah rituals are founded upon the concept of unity with Hakk (God) as part of a natural cycle: people come from Hakk and return to Hakk.

There are two forms of Semah: İçeri Semahs (internal semahs) are performed in Cems only among adherents as part of the twelve services; Dışarı Semahs are performed independent of services to promote Semah culture to younger generations. Semahs are the most crucial means for the transmission of the Alevi tradition. All practices, traditional motifs and teachings are passed on orally, and distinct genres of art and literature associated with the tradition continue to thrive. In this way, Semahs play a crucial role in fostering and enriching the traditional music culture of Alevi.

As bearers and practitioners of the semah tradition, Alevi communities are existent all across the world.

UNESCO accepts Semah as a vessel for the expression and manifestation of cultural heritage. In this way Semah uses:

Oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of intangible cultural heritage.

Performing arts in the transmission of rhetoric skills through songs recited by zakirs and prayers uttered by the Dede (spiritual leader).

Social practices, rituals and festive events with regular semah performances in cem rituals.

THE IDENTIFICATION AND DEFINITION OF THE ELEMENT OF SEMAH

Semah; originated from Ancient Mesopotamian word sema meaning heavens, fortune and hearing. Semahs are the most effective instruments for the transmission of Alevi traditions. Semah is one of the main twelve services of the cem rituals which are considered as religious practices by Alevi adherents.

It is possible to encounter various kinds of semahs within Alevism, with different musical characteristics and rhythmic structures. The fact that there are variations in melodic and lyrical structure of semahs with the same name is an evident sign of the richness in semah culture. Centuries of oral transmission of semahs from generation to generation has enabled a rich diversity within semah culture.

One of the main principles on which semahs are conceptualized is the unity with Hakk which happens through a natural cycle. In this cycle, man comes from Hakk and goes back to Hakk a cycle which resembles the circulation of celestial bodies in the universe. However, man is the centre point of this circulation. Hakk is omnipresent and semah is the way to reach Hakk.

Hand and body motions in semahs have symbolical meanings. For instance, the motion in which one palm faces the sky while the other faces the earth is meant to say "You are Hakk, we are the people, I come from You and hold your essence in me, I am not separate from You" and "To take from Hakk and give to the community, to share". The motion in which palms first face the sky and then turned to the earth is meant to represent this same thought.

When semahcis face each other it presents the presence of Hakk within man and each semahci witnesses the divine beauty of Hakk within the image of the person in front of them.

The motion in which semahci turns the palm of his hand to his face represents man seeing his own beauty in the mirror and therefore he also witnesses the divine beauty of Hakk. When both palms facing the sky are pulled towards the heart it represents the proverb "Hakk I am Man, so Hakk is in me" or "Hakk is in Man".

Semahs are categorized into two groups:

1- İçeri (private) semahs / Order semahs

2- Dışarı (public) semahs / Avare semahs

İçeri Semahs (Order semahs): They are performed in Cems (considered as religious practices by Alevi adherents) where 12 services are carried out. It is not desirable to perform içeri semahs in front of those outside the faith. There are three aspects that make up the performance:

- Ağırılama: The prelude containing slow movements.
- Yürütme: The phase in which the semah gets faster and livelier.
- Çark: The movement of moving around oneself and others. The final phase when the semah is the fastest and hardest to perform.

While this three-phase composition of semahs is customary, it is possible to see other kinds of performances as well. In some semahs it is very difficult to distinguish these phases from each other.

Dışarı Semahs (Avare semah, Yoz Semah or Mengis): They are performed independent of the 12 services for the purpose of teaching the semah culture to younger generations. Nevertheless, they are still loyal to semah principles. Dışarı semahs are mostly comprised of two phases; 'ağırlama' and 'yürütme' or 'ağırlama' and 'çark'.

Although semah performances vary according to the region, the main characteristics are common:

- Semahs are performed together by both men and women,
- While semahcis in içeri semahs are limited in number; there is no such restriction for dışarı semahs.
- Semahcis start the semahs by greeting and inviting each other.
- While performing semah, semahcis are positioned in a circular order or facing each other, without touching or holding.
- Bağlama is usually the accompanying instrument to semahs; but there are some regions where other rhythm instruments are also played during semahs.
- While there is no specific attire to be worn in semahs it is not uncommon to wear traditional clothes in rural cems (considered as religious practices by Alevi adherents).
- On completion of semahs, the dede will (spiritual leaders) usually say a prayer. The semah is never applauded because it is a religious practice rather than a means of entertainment.
- Semah is passed on to further generations through the performance of the tradition.

The basic characteristics and universal values reflecting the understanding of tradition bearers of

Semah are as follows:

- In Alevi belief, every human being has a divine essence and they see man in unity with Hakk known as "En-el Hak" meaning "I am one with God". Thus, during the worship they prostrate towards one another.
- Seeing man in unity with Hakk, they internalize a humanist philosophy.
- In Alevi belief, sharing is of great importance in social life. "Musahiplik" (a kind of fellowship as regards to Alevi belief) in which two individuals choose one another as spiritual brothers or sisters committing to care for the spiritual, emotional, physical and financial needs of the other, for the purpose of creating a type of sincere unity.
- Alevis object to gender discrimination, therefore they pray side by side.
- Alevis view offending human beings as on an equal level to offending Hakk; hence, through establishing a form of judging mechanism called "düşkünlük", they use a sanction power over the members to prevent them from committing misdeeds. If one commits any of those, s/he is declared as "düşkün" (shunned) and temporarily or permanently excommunicated from the community or society.
- The practices, traditional motifs and teachings are orally transmitted rather than written sources and, therefore, distinct genres of art and literature particular to the tradition, have been created.
- They practice their authentic worship and convey their culture through the use of lyrics, music and semah.

ENSURING VISIBILITY AND AWARENESS AND ENCOURAGING THE CONTINUATION OF SEMAH

Semah is the most crucial element in terms of the portrayal of the Alevi tradition. The aesthetics of semah performances have inspired various forms of visual arts (painting, sculpture, theatre, etc.) and related artistic products contribute to the visibility of this aesthetic aspect of semah (See: Photo below).

Semah play a crucial role in fostering and enriching the traditional music culture of Alevi as well as being an important instrument for raising awareness.

The authentic aspect of its oral structure and expression not only contributes to the overall visibility of traditional folk literature, but also raises awareness as an example of local literature. The musical and dancing characteristics of semahs constitute a common language for humanity as artistic creations in which faith and art are harmoniously integrated to raise awareness in national and international platform. Moreover it enables a better platform for inter-societal discussion.

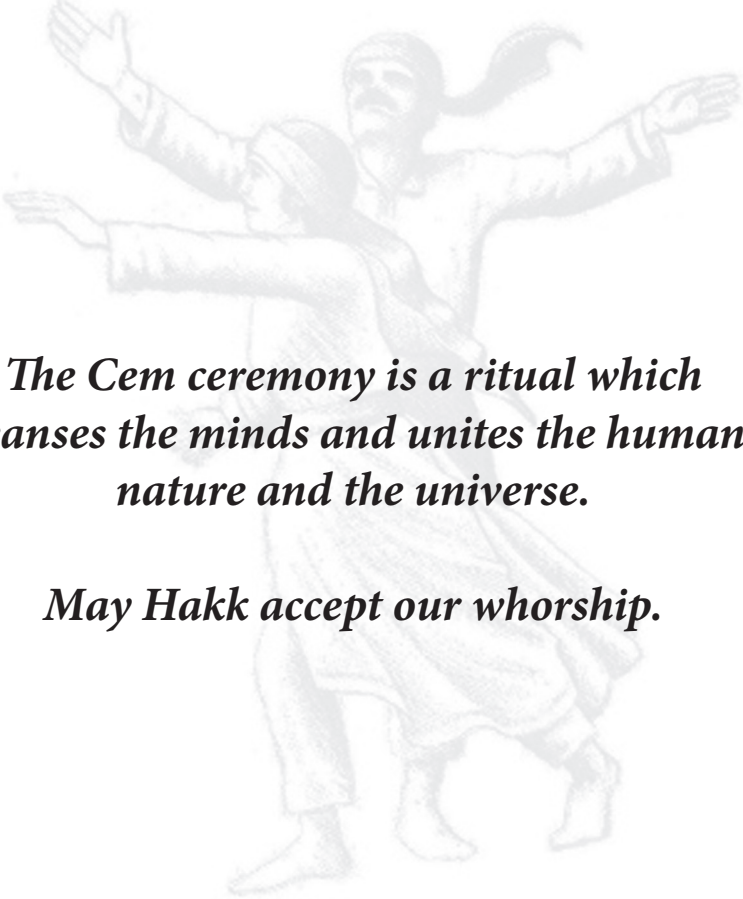
The human-centred perception of the world and the universe and humanist philosophy of semah are values which can contribute to the intercultural discussion

Different types of Semah:

1. Kırklar Semah: takes its name from Kırklar Cems, represents the mystical gathering of the 40's council. It has three aspects; ağırılama (slow movements), yürütme (performing), and çark (turning around oneself and each other).
2. Turnalar Semah: The crane bird has an important place in Alevi belief. The Turna semah is based on the movements of the crane, which are slow and established
3. Kırat Semah: This semah has many different symbolisations, including the planets turning around the sun.
4. Urfa Semah: This Semah represents the life of humanity, from birth to death. Whilst also being the story of the migration of the crane.
5. Ladik Semah: This is a ritual Semah performed in the Cems in Samsun, taking its name from Ladik, a city in the Samsun Province.
6. Hacı Bektaş Semah: Performed in order to respect of Hacı Bektaş Veli. The right hand is fixed on the chest at the start of this semah.
7. Hubyar Semah: It is performed with 5 women, 4 men as cans (souls). Arms are relaxed, and body is slightly bent at the start of this semah. During this semah they spin around while at the same time spinning in a circle.

Zakir

The Zakir sits next to the Dede during the Cem. With prompts from the dede he/she invites the 12 services with his words and the rhythms of the bağlama with Voices, Phrases, Breath, Duvaz, Semah and Mersiyes. The Breaths mention Hakk, Muhammed and Ali. Duvaz's mentions the 12 imams. Mersiyes are the mournful songs for the Imam Huseyin.



*The Cem ceremony is a ritual which
cleanses the minds and unites the human,
nature and the universe.*

May Hakk accept our whorship.

*“the end of the path would be
dark if the path is not science.”*

Hace Bektash Veli

SEMAH



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