

Pir Sultan Abdal: Encounters with Persona in Alevi Lyric Song

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Encounters in Text

In his 1997 Nobel Prize lecture, *Contra jogulatores obliquentes*, Italian dramatist Dario Fo makes an oblique reference to a famous medieval Ottoman “jester.”¹ The “jester” is not mentioned by name but rather in the context of the murder of 35 artists and writers in July 1993 when religious bigots set alight the Madımak Hotel in the eastern Turkish city of Sivas.² Those killed were there to participate in the Pir Sultan Abdal *etkinlikleri* (festivities).³ The “jester” Fo refers to is the eponymous identity in whose memory the festival is held, the Alevi dervish, poet, rebel, and martyr Pir Sultan Abdal. Fo’s reference to the Sivas massacre was a significant statement about this incident in an international forum; but it also demonstrates the misunderstanding of the persona of Pir Sultan Abdal when refracted through time, language, and the chasm that beckons when peering askance into the opaqueness of an esoteric culture. Pir Sultan Abdal’s persona, as perceived and expressed by contemporary intellectuals and artists, was fundamental to the Sivas events,⁴ but Fo’s commendable reference gives no sense of this potent and complex persona. Indeed it even distorts and trivializes it.

Pir Sultan Abdal dominates the Turkish Alevi-Bektaşî oral lyric tradition in his influence through text and persona and is counted as one of the seven great bards, the *yedi ulu ozan*, of

¹ Fo uses the term *giullare*, meaning a jester, buffoon, or more generally minstrel, but not poet or bard, which would be more accurate though less in keeping with the theme of his Nobel Prize speech. In the official English version of the lecture, “jester” is used (Fo 1997).

² The number of victims of the Sivas event is variously given as 33, 35, and 37. Alevis generally acknowledge the murder of 33 *canlar* or “Alevi souls” and also acknowledge two hotel employees who died in the Madımak Hotel. At the memorial erected in the village of Banaz, the 33 are named and the two employees are acknowledged but not named. The remaining two victims making up the 37 died outside the hotel.

³ The Pir Sultan Abdal festival was first held in June 1979, shortly after the completion and erection of a large statue of Pir Sultan (by Cahit Koççoban) on the hill above the village of Banaz. After the second festival in 1980 and following the military coup in September of that year, the festival was abandoned until it was re-established in 1992. The 1993 festival, the fourth one, included events planned to be held in Sivas on July 2 and in Banaz on July 3 and 4. The festival has continued to be held annually in Banaz since its re-establishment.

⁴ This persona was not specifically the catalyst for the riots, even though a newly erected statue of Pir Sultan was torn down in the riot.

Alevi-Bektaşî ritual tradition.⁵ His *deyiş*,⁶ along with those of Yunus Emre and Karacaoğlan,⁷ are commonly regarded as the epitome of the genre and together form the most significant and influential canon of Turkish folk literature. While Yunus is the universal mystic, even humanist (Halman 1972) and Karacaoğlan the incorrigible wandering lover, Pir Sultan Abdal presents a complex persona encompassing the mystical expression of sixteenth-century⁸ antinomianism together with a personal story of integrity and betrayal. This faceted persona has provided, in the texts attributed to him and identified as such by the self-naming device (*mahlas*), the substance for the production of interpretative works and discourse, especially in recent decades.

The significance of the figure of Pir Sultan Abdal can be understood from the number of *deyiş* attributed to him and, perhaps more importantly, from the influence that both his lyrical works and his persona maintain over Alevi-Bektaşî ritual and, especially, social and political culture from his home and heartland in Anatolia to the Balkans and beyond to the modern Alevi diaspora in Europe and elsewhere. No other poet has quite the reach or engenders the continued engagement of scholars, writers, musicians, and social and cultural activists as does Pir Sultan Abdal. This profile makes him a figure of interest and fascination. The persona of Pir Sultan Abdal might be understood as perceived through a prism: from one perspective there is a focused, iconic persona; from other perspectives we may view the refracted strands of illumination that serve to build that persona. Such strands encompass the legendary personal story of steadfastness, betrayal, and martyrdom; the elusive historical identity; the historic milieu from which he emerged (being the formative period for modern Alevi-ism); the transmission and development over time of a large body of *deyiş* and of a poetic identity through the use of the self-naming convention (*mahlas*); and the appropriation of the persona for the service of identity politics and artistic creativity in modern times.

Pir Sultan Abdal emerged from the esoteric and guarded community of Alevi ritual and culture into a wider public scrutiny shortly after the establishment of the Turkish Republic in

⁵ This bardic tradition is frequently referred to, but see for example Ulusoy n.d. and Clarke 1999:60. The other bards are Nesîmî (d. 1418), Hatayi (d. 1524), Fuzûlî (d. 1556), Yemînî (fl. early sixteenth century), Virânî (fl. early sixteenth century), and Kul Himmet (fl. late sixteenth century). Arguments can be made for the significance of other poets, notably Hatayi (Shah Ismail) in regard to his influence on Alevi-Bektaşî ritual (Gallagher 2004). Yet judged by popular and scholarly interest as demonstrated through book production, associations, recordings, and performance, Pir Sultan is clearly the most pervasive of these poets.

⁶ *Deyiş* (plural: *deyişler*) is the general term for the esoteric lyric verse attributed to Alevi poets. Throughout I will use this term interchangeably with poem, song, verse, or lyric. I use the singular form rather than plural when referring to the class of lyric or body of works.

⁷ The most scholarly editions of Yunus Emre's poetry in English are those of Grace Martin Smith (1993) and Talat Sait Halman (1972). Unlike Pir Sultan Abdal, Karacaoğlan has received the benefit of a small edition of versions in English (Karabaş and Yarnall 1996). A welcome addition to the very few English versions of Alevi-Bektaşî folk lyric is the small but usefully broad selection of translations by Jennifer Ferraro and Latif Bolat (2007).

⁸ All dates refer to the Gregorian calendar Common Era (CE).

1923.⁹ Besim Atalay included a number of texts among the *nefes*¹⁰ published in his 1924 book *Bektaşilik ve edebiyat* (Atalay 1991), the earliest work on Alevi-Bektaşî-s published in republican Turkey. In 1928 Mehmet Fuad Köprülü published a short “life” of Pir Sultan Abdal in *Hayat mecmuası* (Köprülü 1991), followed in 1929 by Sadettin Nüzhet’s publication of the first substantial collection of poems (Ergun 1929). The fact that such a collection¹¹ could be put together attests to the existence of a significant number of works attributable to Pir Sultan Abdal in oral tradition at the end of the Ottoman Empire. Much of the content of this and subsequent collections was obtained from *cönk* and *mecmua*, manuscript sources belonging to notable Alevi-Bektaşî-s that were maintained so as to record collections of texts of importance to them or their communities. Indeed, although these manuscript notebooks represent a written source, their purpose was primarily as a mnemonic to support the practice of ritual and the spiritual development and understanding of the compiler. They are best understood as forming part of the oral tradition from which the verses arise (Başgöz 1998:41; Avcı 2006:13).

Since the publication of Ergun’s book, notable additions to the published collections of Pir Sultan *deyiş*—obtained particularly through fieldwork in the Sivas region¹²—have been made by Abdülbâki Gölpınarlı and Pertav Naili Boratav (1943), Cahit Öztelli (1971), and İbrahim Aslanoğlu (1984). The most complete collections of Pir Sultan Abdal lyrics now amount to more than 400 poems. Because we have no autograph or near-contemporary manuscript, it is not possible to verify the authenticity of the lyrics in regard to actual authorship. Some texts attributed to Pir Sultan Abdal clearly could not have been composed by him (for example, the lyrics describing his death and its aftermath). This is indeed one of the most important aspects of this tradition to understand: that the attribution of a lyric to Pir Sultan Abdal is not ultimately a matter of unambiguous authorship, but is rather a matter of Pir Sultan Abdal texts reflecting the perception of his persona by the community and individuals who have maintained, perpetuated, and made use of his songs. While the attribution of the texts to historic identities is a concern to many scholars, the ambiguities of the tradition do not necessarily trouble those working or living within the Alevi tradition. For example, Dertli Divani (an Alevi *dede*, a poet and recording artist)

⁹ Since the late 1990s a small but wide-ranging number of publications concerning Alevis has appeared in English. Clarke 1999 provides the most accessible overview of history, beliefs, and issues and offers a good summation of Turkish views. Shankland 2003 brings an anthropological perspective and is particularly good on details of ritual. Collections edited by Tord Olsson et al. (1998), Paul J. White and Joost Jongerden (2003), and Hege White Markussen (2005) provide a broad coverage of issues, particularly in respect to the expression of Alevi identity. Sökefeld 2008 deals with Alevis in Germany and their relationship to movements asserting Alevi identity. The small publication by Ali Yaman and Aykan Erdemir (2006) is particularly valuable as a work written by Alevis associated with one of the most prominent Alevi organizations in Turkey. Şener 2009, although poorly translated, provides an additional Alevi perspective from a prominent writer on Alevi issues.

¹⁰ *Nefes* is literally “breath.” Here this may be understood as synonymous with *deyiş*; however, in certain contexts the term may have the more specific connotation of “devotional song.” It is the preferred term among the urban and Balkan Bektaşî.

¹¹ Ergun’s book includes 105 *deyiş* texts.

¹² This fieldwork includes collecting trips to Banaz, the village 45 kilometers north of Sivas where Pir Sultan is generally thought to have lived.

can say that if people admire Pir Sultan and use that *mahlas*, and Pir Sultan earned that person's love, and that person follows Pir Sultan, then the song can be accepted as Pir Sultan's.¹³

The earliest appearance of texts attributed to Pir Sultan can be found in the *Menâkıbu'l-Esrar Behcetü'l-Ahrâr*¹⁴ composed by Bisâtî in the late sixteenth century (Bisâtî 2003).¹⁵ Early manuscript copies of the *Menâkıb*, at least according to that consulted by Gölpınarlı (Gölpınarlı and Boratav 1943), appear to already include lyrics with different forms for the *mahlas*: that is, both "Pir Sultan" and "Pir Sultan Abdal."¹⁶

The persona of Pir Sultan Abdal has motivated a vast literary and dramatic output. This includes the numerous collections of poems, novelistic treatments such as those by Orhan Ural (1990) and Battal Pehlivan (1993), poetic treatments by Zeki Büyüktanır (1998) and Mehmet Başaran (2002), and dramatic treatments, notably Erol Toy's 1969 play and the 1973 feature film by Remzi Jöntürk starring Fikret Hakan based on the legend as told by the Divriği *aşık* Mahmut Erdal (1999:37).

The (Re-)Construction of Historical Identity

Despite the fact that there are no known contemporary documents that definitely identify him, there is no compelling reason to doubt the existence of a historical identity behind the persona of Pir Sultan Abdal who lived in the sixteenth century. We know, for example, of Shah Ismail, the first Safavid Shah of Iran, as a historical identity who also composed lyric poetry in Turkish and that *deyiş* attributed to him with the *mahlas* "Hatayi" have been maintained in Alevi oral tradition.¹⁷ Further, there is no tradition of inventing the composers of *deyiş* among the Alevi. The importance and authority attributed to the *aşıklar* as the composers and transmitters of Alevi ritual culture argues against such possibility.

Most published editions concerned with Pir Sultan address, in greater or lesser detail and conviction, the issue of his historical location.¹⁸ The attempts to locate the historical identity are necessarily based, in large part, on finding plausible connections between known historical

¹³ Personal communication with Dertli Divani, July 2, 2002, Dikmen, Ankara.

¹⁴ This work is also known as the *İmam Cafer Buyruğu* or the *Büyük Buyruğu*.

¹⁵ The published edition cited is in fact from a manuscript copied around 1612 or 1613 (Bisâtî 2003:8). The text of one of the two *deyiş* from this manuscript attributed to Pir Sultan is included in the Appendix along with my English translation.

¹⁶ Regrettably, Gölpınarlı did not publish this manuscript, but he does indicate elsewhere (2007:654) that it was copied from a manuscript dated 1017 in the *Hijri* calendar (around 1608-09).

¹⁷ On the influence of the lyric works of Shah Ismail in Alevi-Bektaşî culture, see especially Gallagher 2004 and, as Gallagher notes, see the early evidence of this influence in proto-Alevi *kızılbaş* ritual in Michele Membré's account of his mission to the court of Shah Tahmasp I in 1539-1542 (1999:42).

¹⁸ Some scholars, for example İsmail Kaygusuz (1995) and Mehmet Bayrak (1984), go to some lengths to establish plausible chronologies. Ali Haydar Avcı (2004 and 2006) provides the most substantial treatment of the issues of historical location, while Esat Korkmaz (2005b:24-25) gives a useful summary of the prevailing views.

circumstances and the content of his songs, along with a concordance of his putative life with the historical record and scraps of group biographical data—suggestive of, if not strictly, a prosopographical approach. Specifically, this comes down to two fundamental contentions: that Pir Sultan was involved in rebellious activity against the Ottoman authorities (in support of the Safavid Shah) when such activity was fervent during the sixteenth century; and that he was executed by an Ottoman governor called, according to legend, Hızır Paşa. To this account might be added the documentary evidence of the *Menâkıbu'l-Esrar Behcetü'l-Ahrâr* in which, in early seventeenth-century manuscripts, we have the first record of lyric works attributed to Pir Sultan. Since the other poets included in this *buyruk*, such as Hatâyi (Shah Ismail), Nesimi, and Kaygusuz Abdal, are among the major Alevi-Bektaşî poets, it would seem that Pir Sultan's name and reputation was sufficiently established by this time to be included among such company.

It is not within the scope of this essay to go into the arguments for or against any particular dating in detail. However, it should be emphasized that there is a persistent interest among scholars in locating Pir Sultan Abdal in a time and circumstance that reflects a desire to reach a historicist interpretation of the persona. This is focused on establishing the date of his death (from which his approximate period of birth and the years he was active may also then be deduced) and the likely uprising or insurgent activities in which he may have participated. Other speculations arise from situating the historical person, such as his possible travels, particularly to the Balkans¹⁹ and Iran.

An evocative record of the times in which the historical Pir Sultan Abdal lived is found in the *mühimme defterleri* (records of significant issues), which chronicle the orders sent from the Ottoman Divan to local authorities (*sancak bey-s*, *beylerbeyi-s*) to deal with insurgent activities. These records commence in the mid-sixteenth century, and a number of the records for the later part of the century are orders that deal with insurgent pro-Safavid *kızılbaş* activity. Such records are often brief and tantalizing, opening the door, if only fleetingly, to such activity in Anatolia.²⁰ Not surprisingly, some scholars have identified possible connections with Pir Sultan Abdal in the *mühimme defterleri*. Though there is no specific mention of Pir Sultan, Saim Savaş (2002) suggests a certain Şeyh Haydar as a possible historical Pir Sultan Abdal, noting the fact that Pir Sultan's real name—according to tradition and the evidence of some poems—was Haydar. Şeyh Haydar appeared in 1585 in a village near Amasya, apparently after a long absence, claiming to have been with the (Safavid) Shah and to have raised 40,000 men from the region for his cause. Şeyh Haydar was captured by Ahmet Çavuş and imprisoned in Çorum (Savaş 2002 and Imber 1979).

Others have suggested the activities of the so-called “False Ismail” as a plausible fifth column movement with which Pir Sultan Abdal may have been associated. This “False Ismail” (*düzmece* or *sahte Şah İsmail*) suddenly appears in the *mühimme defterleri* in the middle of 1578 and disappears equally mysteriously around January 1579. “False Ismail” claimed to be

¹⁹ Turgut Koca (1990) proposes a distinct and earlier, fifteenth-century identity located in the Balkans who he refers to as “Serezli Pir Sultan,” a proposition that Avcı (2006:318-23) dismisses by noting Koca's apparent confusion with a Macedonian Bektaşî leader Piri Baba.

²⁰ C. H. Imber (1979) gives a detailed account of these records in reference to the subjugation of the *kızılbaş* in the sixteenth century.

Shah Ismail; he attracted a large following particularly in the Bozok (Yozgat) region and may have been acting independently or as an agent of the Safavids. The “False Ismail” episode does give a plausible picture of the sort of activity that Pir Sultan Abdal may well have been involved with or sympathetic to, though we cannot say for certain that he was. Pir Sultan is not mentioned by name in relation to the “False Ismail” events, though one notable follower (*halife*), Yunus, is indeed identified by name (Imber 1979:251-54). The absence of any mention of Pir Sultan from the *mühimme defterleri* may lend support to an earlier dating of his period of activity, especially during the time of or shortly after the Kalendar Şah revolt in the late 1520s.²¹

A more remarkable assertion is that of Erdoğan Çınar (2007), who suggests Constantine Silvanus (the seventh-century Paulician) as the source of the Pir Sultan Abdal identity.²² The lack of any contemporary documents to identify the historical Pir Sultan behind the persona leaves open the possibility of all manner of speculation upon improbable identities. The name Pir Sultan Abdal is in fact a quite generic appellation, if particularly exalted. *Pir* carries the meaning of a patron saint or the founder and leader of a *tarikât* (dervish order) or, more simply, a spiritual leader.²³ The designation of *Sultan* connotes a person of high standing within the Alevi-Bektaşî *yol* (path) or *tarikât*. The basic meaning of *Abdal* is “dervish,” but it may also refer specifically to one belonging to one of the “mystical anarchist” antinomian groups active in sixteenth-century Anatolia (Karamustafa 1993), the *Rum Abdallar* (Abdals of Anatolia).²⁴ John Kingley Birge (1994:251) also notes a formal mystical meaning in respect to *abdâl*, connoting the ability to change from a physical state to a spiritual state. It is, then, perhaps not so remarkable that one encounters references in the historical record to other shadowy “Pir Sultans.” It is more remarkable that they are indeed elusive, and it is all the more tempting because of their scarcity to look for some connection to the Pir Sultan Abdal of legend no matter how tenuous. For example, is there anything to be learned from the evidence of Mustawfi, a fourteenth-century source, who mentions a certain Pir Sultan as being the son of the Ilkhanid Rashid al-Din, the Persian historian and the brother of the vezir Ghiyath al-Din who, along with his brother, was executed in 1336 (Morton 1999)?²⁵ An even more remote possibility is a mysterious saint in Baluchistan called Pir Sultan who is reported as providing holy protection and is said to have

²¹ Halil Inalcik (1973:195), for example, specifically relates Pir Sultan’s verses to the period of Ottoman-Safavid conflict in 1534-35.

²² Çınar’s attractively produced and illustrated book was published in April 2007, and the next published monograph on Pir Sultan by the Marxist writer and artist Suha Bulut, published in December 2007, takes issue immediately with Çınar’s claims in its opening pages, thus demonstrating the active discourse in respect to interpretations of Pir Sultan’s formative identity.

²³ This and the following definitions follow Birge (1994) and Korkmaz (2005a). The latter gives a particularly detailed consideration of *pir*.

²⁴ In Pir Sultan Abdal’s *mahlas* it may perhaps even be suggested that “Abdal” is descriptive and used adjectivally in respect to the nominative Pir Sultan.

²⁵ The reference to the execution of this Pir Sultan is tantalizing in respect to the legendary demise of Pir Sultan Abdal (see below in regard to the legendary story of Pir Sultan Abdal).

rendered innocuous all the snakes in the area (Tate 1909:46), also giving his name to the great mountain Kuh-i-Sultan that is claimed to have engulfed the saint when he died (19).

The *Mahlas* Convention and the Social Maintenance of Persona

A striking aspect of the Alevi-Bektaşî *deyiş*—and perhaps most readily dismissed or overlooked because of its ubiquity within the form—is the use of the self-naming convention, *mahlas*,²⁶ in which the poet ostensibly identifies himself (or herself) within the final, signature verse. While it could not be considered a widespread convention in other poetic traditions, self-naming is common in Persian and Ottoman lyric poetry (Losensky 1998; Andrews 1985) and, in a less pervasive manner, in the *troubadour* poetry of twelfth-century Provence—for example in the poetry of Marcabru (Kimmelman 1999)—and in the French lyrics of the twelfth- and thirteenth-century *trouvères* such as Gace Brulé and Blondel de Nesle (Rosenberg 2004).²⁷ The latter are courtly traditions displaying a stylized self-conscious sensibility in which it is possible to detect the overt self-promotion of the artist or even a nascent modern literary persona (Kimmelman 1999). Samuel N. Rosenberg (2004:57-58) places the introduction of the poet's signature in the lyrics of Gace Brulé in the context of the prosodic and semantic function of closure and summation of the *envoi*, suggesting that it also marks the limit of the performer's assumption of the poem's first person voice and a rupture of the fusion of poetic persona and performer; and, in the case of Blondel de Nesle, a notable insistence on self-naming that suggests self-centeredness (66). Walter G. Andrews (1985:170), referring to Ottoman lyric song, is right to discourage a simple dismissal of a practice that is so common and suggests that the *tahallus*²⁸ (*mahlas*) is a “forceful reminder of the dramatic situation” that may include self-praise and an assertion of competitive superiority by the poet. While Andrews (2002:36) proposes that “we will never really understand the Ottoman poetry of the elites until we understand the Ottoman poetry of the masses and the reverse,”²⁹ I would add that the ubiquity of the *mahlas/tahallus* in both these poetic traditions suggests this device as a focus for comparative study particularly in regard to its function in the respective traditions.³⁰

²⁶ This self-naming convention is also sometimes referred to in Turkish as *takma ad* or *tapşırma*, the latter particularly in respect to the Sunni *aşık* tradition of competitive performance encounters (*aşık karşılaşmaları*), where it carries the inherent meaning of “delivering” or “commending” oneself to another.

²⁷ The convention also appears in other mystical poetic traditions, including the *ginans* of the Indian Satpanth Isma'ili saint, Pir Shams (Kassam 1995).

²⁸ In respect to Persian and Ottoman lyrics the self-naming convention is variously referred to as *takhallus*, *tahallus*, *tahallüs*, and *makhlas* or *maxlas*.

²⁹ The subtle, even covert, relationship between high Ottoman poetic culture and traditional expressive culture, as exemplified by the Alevis, in sustaining an Ottoman ideological ethos of compartmentalized groups is the subject of a fascinating study by Walter Andrews and Irene Markoff (1987).

³⁰ While the literature on the *mahlas/tahallus* remains scant, in addition to the works of Paul E. Losensky and Andrews already cited, see also Arberry 1946, Skalmowski 1990, de Bruijn 1999, and Meisami 1990.

In the oral tradition of Alevi lyric song it is through the social function of maintaining a community of associative personas that the persistence and strength of the *mahlas* may, with further research, be revealed more deeply.³¹ In the oral tradition this self-naming convention takes on a more socially faceted and ambiguous function rather than a mere convention, rhetorical self-reference, or residual technical device,³² and more subtle than the self-promotion of poetic prowess. While the *mahlas* may indeed be seen as essentially a signing device used to assert the authorship or attribution of the poem, when this strategy is perpetuated in the communal expressive context of the oral tradition it is invested with both the potential to function as the assertion of transmitted and remembered authority and the potential for the creative and interpretive possibility offered by the expressive ambiguities of orally transmitted personas. It is my assertion that the *mahlas* is in fact an indispensable and perhaps even determining factor in the function, persistence, and nature of this poetic, mystical song tradition through its referencing, regeneration, and re-interpretation of the expressive authorities of that tradition.

It is clear that the *mahlas* can be an ambiguous or malleable device and *deyişler* attributed to one poet on the basis of the *mahlas* may also be attributed to another by changing the *mahlas*. However, this should not be understood to be a matter of whim or mischief. Some *deyiş* may be able to be attributed to either Pir Sultan Abdal or Şah Hatayi,³³ for example, since they emerge from a common milieu. And certainly it is possible for later compositions to be attributed to earlier poets because they were composed deliberately with the perceived understanding of the earlier poets' works or they suit received poetic identities. It is the involvement of the tradition—that is, those who maintain and construct the tradition—that affirms and creatively develops the poetic identity. The conventional use of the *mahlas*, combined with the themes and concerns of the text (particularly in respect to ritual and belief, authoritative figures, and identity) thus maintains these personas in a social context. For this reason (though there are certainly others), the attempts to specifically identify multiple identities for Pir Sultan, the notion of the so-called “Pir Sultan Abdallar” (“Pir Sultan Abdals”), as well as distinguishing them in large part by the form of the *mahlas*, seem ultimately unnecessary and unsupportable. The highly respected Sivas folklorist İbrahim Aslanoğlu (1920-95) is the most influential in respect to associating specific lyrics (with specific *mahlas* forms) with distinct authorial identities. His identification of six distinct Pir Sultan Abdals³⁴ (Aslanoğlu 1984) is attractive in its neatness and certainly influential, being adopted by scholars such as Asım

³¹ In respect to this proposition, interpretation of the function of the *mahlas* in Alevi lyric that employs Thomas A. DuBois' (2006) typology of interpretive axes (specifically the associative axis) may prove instructive.

³² The self-naming convention in respect to Persian poetry can be related back to the rhetorical transitional device of Arabic origin (de Bruijn 1998).

³³ Mehmet Fuad Köprülü noted this in 1928 (1991:7) and Haydar Kaya (1999:56f.) lists twenty such examples.

³⁴ The six include: Pir Sultan, Pir Sultan Abdal, Pir Sultan'ım Haydar, Pir Sultan Abdal (Halil İbrahim), Abdal Pir Sultan, and Pir Sultan Abdal (*Aruz Şairi*).

Bezirci³⁵ (d. 1993) and others since. Aslanoğlu's work is serious, worthy, and surely valuable if for no other reason than to demonstrate the unsustainability of the conclusion, as other scholars have shown.³⁶ Whether there are six or more contributors to the canon of Pir Sultan Abdal *deyiş* is not the critical point, since whatever the identities of the poets who contributed to the canon, within the tradition in which these songs have been maintained the identity of Pir Sultan Abdal continues to be perceived as a single persona. Even the scholars and anthologists who support the concept of multiple Pir Sultans seem reluctant to fully commit to their assertion and so deconstruct the persona, continuing to include in their collections *deyiş* under the various forms of the *mahlas*.

The *mahlas* remains an aspect of Turkish folk literature that has received little detailed and analytical attention³⁷ even though it is the basis upon which the prolific collection and anthologizing of Turkish folk poetry (*halk şiirleri*) is conducted and remains fundamental to the understanding of the poetic identity at the center of such collections. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to consider the *mahlas* in detail, my purpose is, in part, to highlight the *mahlas* in the Alevi lyric tradition as a convention that, rather than being lightly dismissed, requires and will reward greater scholarly attention.

The Legend of Pir Sultan Abdal

The legendary story of Pir Sultan Abdal is understood from songs that are part of the Pir Sultan Abdal tradition as well as from folk legends, the latter collected particularly from the Sivas region. The following gives an outline of the essentials of the story.³⁸

³⁵ Bezirci was one of the victims killed at the Madımak Otel in the 1993 Sivas riots.

³⁶ See Avcı 2004:163ff. for a detailed response to the "Pir Sultan Abdallar" assertion.

³⁷ The attention that has been given to the *mahlas* in Turkey has focused overwhelmingly on Ottoman elite literary tradition and cataloging of names; see Yıldıırım 2006, Semih 1993, and Çalık 1999. Works that have considered the *mahlas* in popular tradition include Elçin 1997 and D. Kaya 1998.

³⁸ The story is recounted in most of the books devoted to Pir Sultan and even expanded into novel form in Pehlivan 1993 and Ural 1990. For simplicity, the version given here largely follows Fuat 1999 and Öztelli 1971. Pertev Naili Boratav draws on his valuable field research undertaken in 1939 in the Sivas region, including in Banaz for the best documented account of the folk legend (Gölpınarlı and Boratav 1943), from which many have subsequently drawn.

According to legend and song, Pir Sultan's family came originally from Yemen and was descended from Imam Ali's grandson, the fourth Imam³⁹ Zeynel-Abidin.⁴⁰ His family settled in Banaz north of Sivas in the shadow of Yıldız Dağ (Star Mountain). Pir Sultan's original name was Haydar.

One day when the seven-year-old Haydar was pasturing his father's sheep near Yıldız Dağ he fell asleep and began to dream. In his dream he saw a white-bearded old man holding liquor (*içki*) in one hand and an apple in the other. Haydar first took the liquor and drank; then, after taking the apple and seeing that the palm of the old man's hand was a gleaming green, he understood that this man before him was Hacı Bektaş Veli. In the dream Hacı Bektaş Veli gave Haydar the name Pir Sultan. Thus he found himself among the *erenler*, "those on the path seeking truth," playing and singing his poems with the name Pir Sultan, and his fame became widespread.

Some time later, in the village of Sofular, located between Sivas and Hafik, there lived a certain Hızır who, hearing of Pir Sultan's fame, ventured to Banaz. Hızır spent seven years with Pir Sultan (for some time as his *mürid*, or disciple); then one day he came to the Pir asking for his favor and advice as to what post (*makam*) he should eventually assume. Pir Sultan predicts that Hızır would become a great man (*paşa*) who would one day return to hang him.

In due course Hızır goes to Istanbul and with Pir Sultan's support he continues there and becomes a *paşa*. Finally he becomes the *Vezir* (governor) of Sivas, where he gains a reputation for suppressing the poor, eating unlawful food (*haram*), and dishonesty. At this time in Sivas there lived two judges (*kadı*) also known for unlawful indulgence (eating *haram*). Their names were Kara Kadı (Black Judge) and Sarı Kadı (Yellow Judge). Pir Sultan gives the same names, *karakadı* and *sarıkadı*, to his two dogs. Hearing of this action, the judges have Pir Sultan brought to Sivas for questioning, whereby Pir Sultan says to them that his dogs are better than them because unlike the judges they do not eat *haram* food. And to prove it, Pir Sultan challenges the judges to a test. The town's worthies (*hacılar*, *hocalar*) prepare a pot of *helal* (rightful) food and a pot of *haram* food. The judges sit down and eat of the *haram* food while Pir Sultan's dogs do not go near it but go straight to the *helal* food. The worthies declare that the good dogs prevailed over the bad judges. On this event Pir Sultan composes and sings the song beginning, "Koca başlı koca kadı" ("The fat-headed old judge").

Meanwhile a *fetva* (decree) is declared by the Sultan forbidding the mention of the name of the (Safavid) Shah and giving orders to kill those followers of Ali (the *kızılbaş*). Pir Sultan

³⁹ That is, the fourth Imam of Shi'ite tradition.

⁴⁰ Alternatively, and perhaps more plausibly, it is recounted that Pir Sultan's family came from the Horasan region (Khorasan) in northeastern Iran, a place noted for its strong connection to Turkmen Sufic and esoteric (*batıni*) dervish traditions and the birthplace of the Bektaşî patron saint Hacı Bektaş Veli. Boratav, visiting Banaz in 1939, reports that he was shown the millstone (*taş*) reputedly brought by Pir Sultan from Horasan (Gölpınarlı and Boratav 1943:34). Tahir Kutsi Makal (1999:42 and 1977:68), visiting Banaz four decades later, reports villagers saying this stone was brought by the Pir from Yemen by horse. Aşık Banazlı Nuri (Nuri Kılıç, also known as Aşık Deryanî, d. 1997) tried to unravel the mystery of Pir Sultan's family origin for Makal by saying all Turks come from Central Asia through the mixing pot (*harman yeri*, literally "threshing place") of Horasan, but from the perspective of belief (*ibadet*) and essence (*mana*) they come from Yemen, Hijaz, Mosul, Damascus, and Bagdad (Makal 1999:44). The stone can still be seen in Banaz.

records this event in the song beginning, “Fetva vermiş koca başlı kör Müftü” (“So the dim fat-headed Mufti has passed judgment”). Pir Sultan rises to this challenge and makes it clear he will not abandon his devotion to the Shah and sings the song that starts, “Padişah katlime ferman dilese” (“If the Sultan desires an order for my murder”). As Pir Sultan begins to stir up trouble, Hızı Paşa sends for Pir Sultan and tries to treat his former *şeyh* (teacher) well, placing good food before him. But Pir Sultan is not swayed and tells Hızır Paşa that he (Hızır) has left the truth path (*yol*), eaten *haram* food, and stolen the inheritance of orphans. Pir Sultan says he will not eat and not even his dogs would eat, and to prove this he calls to his dogs to come from Banaz—a distance of some forty-five kilometers! Hızır Paşa becomes angry and casts Pir Sultan, his former spiritual master, into the prison at Sivas’s citadel Toprakkale.

But Hızır Paşa remains uneasy and after a time he brings Pir Sultan before him again and says that if Pir Sultan will sing three songs without mentioning the Shah he will pardon him. In response, Pir Sultan does indeed sing three songs but entwines all three from beginning to end with many references to the Shah. These are the songs beginning, “Hızır Paşa bizi berdar etmeden” (“Before Hızır Paşa hangs us”), “Kul olayım kalem tutan eline” (“I am a slave to the hand holding the pen”), and “Karşidan görünen ne güzel yayla” (“How beautiful the plateau over there appears”). Hızır Paşa is enraged by Pir Sultan’s response and orders him to be hanged. And so a gallows is erected in a place in Sivas called Keçibulan.

As Pir Sultan goes to his place of execution, he sings the song that starts, “Bize de Banaz’da Pir Sultan derler” (“They call us in Banaz Pir Sultan”). Hızır Paşa orders the populace to stone Pir Sultan while he proceeds to the gallows and commands death for anyone who does not follow this order. At this time, Pir Sultan’s closest friend (*musahib*), Ali Baba, is troubled at what to do and so he casts a rose as though it were a stone. In response to this act Pir Sultan sings the song beginning, “Şu kanlı zalimin ettiği işler” (“The works of that bloody tyrant”),⁴¹ expressing the fact that he is wounded greatly by this dissembling act while the stones that the strangers throw do not touch him.

The next morning there is much talk in the coffeehouses of Sivas. Someone says “Hızır Paşa hanged Pir Sultan,” while another counters: “Impossible, I saw him this morning on the Koçılar road, in Seyfebeli.” Another questions: “How can this be? I saw him this morning on the Malatya road, on the Kardeşler Pass.” Someone replies: “You are mistaken, I saw him this morning on the Yenihan road on the Şahna Pass.” To which still another says: “I saw him this morning on the Tavra Narrows.” So the people get up and go to the gallows to look. There they see Pir Sultan’s *hırka* (dervish cloak) hanging on the gallows, but he is gone. Hızır Paşa’s watchmen race out after him and come to the Kızılırmak (Red River), where they see Pir Sultan who has crossed over a bridge to the far bank of the river. Noticing the watchmen, Pir Sultan calls out to the bridge to bend, which it does; it then sinks into the water so the watchmen are left on the other side. Pir Sultan then goes to the Shah in Horasan and sings the songs beginning “İptıda bir sofı Şah’a varınca” (“At first a devotee upon reaching the Shah”) and “Diken arasında bir gül açıldı” (“A rose opened among the thorns”). From Horasan he goes to Ardabil where he dies and is buried.

⁴¹ The full text along with my English translation is included in the Appendix.

Pir Sultan is believed to have had three sons—Seyyit Ali Sultan, Pir Mehmet, and Er Gaip Sultan (Pir Gaip)—and one daughter, Sanem, to whom a famous lament (*ağut*) on her father's death is attributed.⁴²

Pir Sultan kızıldım ben de Banaz'da
 Kanlı yaş akıttım baharda güzde
 Dedemi astılar kanlı Sivas'ta
 Darağacı ağlar Pir Sultan deyü

I am Pir Sultan's daughter and in Banaz
 I shed bloody tears in spring and autumn
 They hung my master in bloody Sivas
 The gallows tree weeps, crying Pir Sultan

The Personal as Universal Theme

A theme that emerges from most presentations of the legend of the life of Pir Sultan Abdal is that of the intimate personal story focusing on his resilience and steadfastness in his time of travail at the hands of his persecutor and ultimately executioner, Hızır Paşa. A significant element of this story is the relationship of Pir Sultan Abdal and Hızır Paşa, since the latter was formerly a favored disciple of Pir Sultan Abdal. The story is not merely one of oppression, rebellion, and downfall—it is personal and is raised to universal understanding because of this fact. It is the act of personal betrayal by Hızır Paşa that elevates the mythology of Pir Sultan Abdal's steadfastness: “Dönen dönsün ben dönmezen yolumdan” (“Let the one who turns away, turn, but I will not turn from my path”) sings Pir Sultan. This is the great betrayal of Hızır Paşa: that he had turned from the true path. Similarly, in the famous song “Şu kanlı zalimin ettiği işler,”⁴³ it is the dissembling act of Pir Sultan Abdal's *murid*, Ali Baba, that is presented as the wounding betrayal. It is this inner integrity that is betrayed by Ali Baba.

Brief Notes on the Form and Subject of Pir Sultan Abdal *Deyiş*

The *deyiş* attributed to Pir Sultan Abdal are composed almost exclusively in one of two forms associated with Turkish folk verse: *koşma* (with eleven syllables and regular caesura in units of 6+5 or 4+4+3) and *semai* (with eight syllables and units of 5+3 or 4+4). Haydar Kaya (1999) in his anthology of 407 texts identifies 83 percent as being in eleven-syllable *koşma* form and all but two of the rest in eight-syllable *semai* form. The stanzas may be understood to be composed in quatrains (*dörtlük*) observing a rhyme scheme of *a,b,a,b* for the first stanza

⁴² Avcı 2006:375f. provides a good account of the information we have about Pir Sultan's children and also gives another version of the lament for Pir Sultan, attributing it to his son Pir Mehmet (230).

⁴³ See Appendix for text and translation.

followed by *c,c,c,b*; *d,d,d,b*; and so forth for subsequent stanzas.⁴⁴ These forms utilize purely syllabic meter (*hece vezni*) in contrast to the weighted meter (*aruz vezni*) of Ottoman classical verse. The verses in *koşma* form have as a minimum three stanzas and as many as twelve—at least in the case of those attributed to Pir Sultan.⁴⁵ Asım Bezirci's analysis of 196 texts shows that 53.4 percent have five stanzas with the majority of the rest having four, six, or seven (1994:119). It is a concise lyrical form that also makes use of parataxis and shifts in person, particularly in the climactic signature verse (*mahlas beyti*):

Pir Sultan Abdal'im can göğe ağmaz

I am Pir Sultan Abdal the soul does not flee

...

Pir Sultan Abdal'ım dağlar aşalım

I am Pir Sultan Abdal let us pass over mountains

...

Felek bir iş biçirmiş diyar gel ha ic

Yüz yıl çalış azış ahir sonı hiç

Şu dünya kona kondur göce göc

Pîr Sultanım gecdi bir gün sabahdan

Fate cooks up something, so come here and drink

Work for a hundred years and for little in the end

Let that world come to a halt or move on

I am Pir Sultan, he passed one day in the morning⁴⁶

A number of the songs attributed to Pir Sultan Abdal concern the events of his life, legend, and connection to the Safavid Shah(s). However, the thematic center of Pir Sultan's *deyişler* is Alevi belief (*inanç*), as expressed most importantly through the primacy of the Imam Ali. Kaya asserts from an analysis of 400 texts that around seventy-five percent of them refer either explicitly or covertly to Allah, Muhammad, Ali, Hüseyin, and other Alevi-Bektaşî identities (H. Kaya 1999:47, 55). The themes of resistance, asserting the true path, and ultimately the climax of martyrdom, are also prominent. Pir Sultan views his own fate as a direct line of

⁴⁴ See Bezirci 1994 for a more detailed description and analysis of the formal structure and rhyme schemes of the *koşma* texts. Markoff 1986a and Moyle 1990 both provide a detailed description of these forms in English.

⁴⁵ In fact, lyrics in *deyiş* form can have a much greater number of verses, as in a well-known *tevhid* of Kul Himmet (Üstadım) that runs to 26 verses (Aslanoğlu 1995:123) or Edip Harabi's *Vahdetname* with 28 verses (Özmen 1998:iv, 528).

⁴⁶ The full text and translation of this *deyiş* is included in the Appendix.

martyrdom from the Imam Hüseyin through to the Hurufi *batini* (esoteric) poet Seyyid Nesimi⁴⁷ (whose own martyrdom was connected to his sympathy for Mansür al-Hallāj martyred for his assertion of *anā'l-Haqq*—Turkish *enel Hak*—“I am God”⁴⁸). So Pir Sultan sings:

*Üçüncü ölmem bu hain
Pir Sultan ölür dirilir*

This treachery is my third dying
Pir Sultan dies and returns to life

...

*Pir Sultan Abdal'ım Seyyid Nesimi
Şu âleme destan ettin sesimi*

I am Pir Sultan Abdal, Seyyid Nesimi
You made my voice the story for this world

...

*Çeke çeke ben bu dertten ölürüm
Seversen Ali'yi değme yarama
Ali'nin yoluna serim veririm
Serversen Ali'yi değme yarama*

Ever enduring I die from this malady
If you love Ali don't touch my wound
I devote myself to the way of Ali
If you love Ali don't touch my wound

...

*Pir Sultan'ım Haydar Nesimî'yiz
Tâ ezelden Şah'a kurban serimiz
On İki İmamlar dâr meydanımız
Biz şehidiz Ali'dir serdârımız*

I am Pir Sultan, Haydar, we are Nesimi
Even from eternity we are given to the Shah
The twelve Imams, our place of dwelling
We are martyrs and Ali our commander

⁴⁷ Özmen 1998:i, 249-396 includes a usefully substantial collection of Nesimi's poems and detail about his life.

⁴⁸ On Mansür al-Hallāj and *anā'l-Haqq*, see Schimmel 1975.

Pir Sultan's verse is robust and expresses the esoteric and heterodox beliefs emanating from the time when Alevi-Bektaşî identity was coalescing out of the antinomian Anatolian dervish groups of the sixteenth century (Karamustafa 1993; 1994:83f). It also reflects a response to times of social and political unrest as the Ottoman government asserted its authority in Anatolia in the face of the new threat posed by the Safavid rulers in Iran.⁴⁹ One of the most engaging aspects of Pir Sultan's verse is the manner in which he imbues these themes with references that evoke a sense of the Anatolian landscape, the real world of places, and the resonances of the seasons—a factor that plays a part in connecting his verse intimately with the people.

*Bahar oldu otlar bitti güz geldi
On'ki İmam'lara giden turnalar*

Spring is done, the grass gone, Autumn come
The red cranes are going to the twelve imams

...

*Abdal olup dağdan dağa dolandım
Aştığım bellere göç eylemişim
Kızıl ırmakları bulandırınca
Kayalı göllere göç eylemişim*

I wandered as a dervish from mountain to mountain
I migrated to mountain passes that I went beyond
When the waters of the Red River were churned to mud
I migrated to the rocky lakes

...

*Bu yıl bu dağların karı erimez
Eser bâd-ı sâbah yel bozuk bozuk
Türkmen kalkıp yaylasına yürümez
Yıkılmış aşiret il bozuk bozuk*

The snow doesn't melt on the mountains this year
The morning breeze blows an ill wind of ruin
The Turkmen no longer start out for the highlands
The nomads have cleared off and the land is in ruin⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Barkey 1994 and 2008 and Faroqhi 1995 are particularly useful on the issue of social unrest in Anatolia and the administrative response to it.

⁵⁰ The full text along with my English translation of this *deyiş* is included in the Appendix.

This lived world as expressed through the verse suggests a plausible, sound oral “chain of transmission” (Vansina 1985:29) and the strong possibility that we have an authentic voice in the *deyiş* of Pir Sultan. This is not to assert that this is an individual voice or authorship, but rather that the texts have been maintained and formed following these central themes with considerable authenticity and integrity through successive generations of performance.

Encounters in Music and Performance

While it is natural to focus on the texts, it is important to remember that these are the texts of songs to be performed with music. These are works to be understood in a performance context in which the performer, audience, and the poet’s persona are engaged. Thus, it is the context of the performance and perception of the audience that also play a role in the expression of the poet’s work. The foundational and referential context of the performance of Pir Sultan’s *deyiş* is the Alevi *cem* congregation in which ritual song and dance form a central act of worship (*ibadet*).

What constitutes an authentic performance is elusive, since it must be expressed in terms of what defines Alevi music. This is a subject beyond the scope of this paper; however, I would suggest that any definition of Alevi music begin with an understanding of the specific Alevi musical genres associated with the *cem* ritual *ibadet* services such as *semah*, *tevhid*, *duaz-ı imam*, and *mersiye*.⁵¹ In the broader performance context of the *deyiş*, it is reference to such elements that define the Alevi-ness of the music, at least for those with the knowledge or familiarity to distinguish such associations. Alevi music is essentially song—music with words—and as such the language too is a fundamental element in defining the music. As the renowned Alevi performer Arif Sağ has said, “Alevi için Aleviliğin simgesel sözleri vardı” (“for Alevis, Alevi symbolism is its words”) (Poyraz 2007:165). Words such as *şah* and *pir*, which bear specific meaning in the Alevi context, can be replaced by “*dost*” or “*yar*,”⁵² introducing ambiguity and dissembling such that the Alevi-ness of a song is diluted for public performances. Alevis themselves have participated in this form of dissembling. Mahmut Erdal, for example, reports that he altered a Pir Sultan Abdal text for a version of the *Turna semahı* to a (somewhat garbled) text from Karacaoğlan and Esirî when informed that the Pir Sultan Abdal text could not be sung

⁵¹ Published works on Alevi-Bektaşî music are scant, particularly in regard to specific ritual forms, although the mystical dance *semah* has received attention. Vahid Lütfü Salcı’s short monograph (1940) was the first work of substance in respect to Alevi-Bektaşî music. French musicologist Eugene Borrel published a paper (1934) on Alevi music some years earlier that was indebted to documents provided by Salcı. More recent works that consider music in the context of Alevi ritual practice and expressive culture include Onatça 2007, Erol 2002, Duygulu 1997, and Markoff 1986b and 2002. Markoff 1994 also provides the best consideration of the stylistic characteristics of Alevi music, including instrument tunings, the predominant mode, meter, and stereotyped cadences.

⁵² Both *dost* and *yar* have shades of meanings encompassing “friend,” “lover,” or “beloved.”

on the radio (1999:136). It is this version that now forms part of the standard “repertoire.”⁵³ Aşık Veysel’s commercial recording of one of Pir Sultan’s most famous songs, *Kul olayım kalem tutan ellere* (Şatıroğlu 2001), uses *yar* rather than *şah* and omits the *mahlas* verse altogether. Perhaps the reason such dissembling is readily adopted by Alevi is that the message is obscured only to the outsider, not to those who understand the immanent associations. Alevi music will be defined by context, intention, persona, and musical sound (such as the use of specific instrumental accompaniment, since it would be difficult to conceive of Alevi *deyiş* performed as Alevi music without the central place of the long necked lute, the *bağlama*⁵⁴). The identification and definition of Alevi music is perhaps finally completed by a further element in the performance space—that is, the audience members who understand the extratextual meanings that remain unspoken and who individually or collectively determine the degree to which they observe and acknowledge such extratextual meanings.⁵⁵

In the 1970s the songs of Pir Sultan Abdal were encountered in the public space through popular commercial recordings of artists associated with the political left, including Ruhi Su in 1972 (Su 1993), Rahmi Saltuk in 1975 (Saltuk 1992), and Sadık Gürbüz in 1977 (Gürbüz 2007), who all released long-play recordings devoted entirely to Pir Sultan.⁵⁶ Also notable was Zülfü Livaneli who recorded Alevi songs (while living in Sweden in the early 1970s), including those of Pir Sultan Abdal (Livaneli n.d.) performed in a style that adopted regional Alevi *aşık* tuning on the *bağlama*,⁵⁷ distinguishing them from the stylistically urbane performances of Su, Saltuk, and Gürbüz and pointing toward the direction that popular Alevi performers such as Arif Sağ would pursue most creatively and influentially in the 1980s. Alevi musicians also began to be heard in the 1960s and 1970s, one of the most notable being Feyzullah Çınar (1937-83) from the Divriği region who recorded *deyiş* from many of the Alevi master poets. In the 1970s Livaneli produced

⁵³ Halil Atılğan’s interesting study notes many of the differences between the standard performed repertoire (that is, of the Turkish national broadcasting corporation Türkiye Radyo ve Televizyon Kurumu) and the sources. He does discuss the *Turna Semahı*, and although he notes Mahmut Erdal as the source, he does not mention the change that Erdal asserts (Atılğan 2003:203f.). Erdal does reproduce a facsimile notation of his version with the Pir Sultan text in his book (1999:365-70).

⁵⁴ It is not necessary, however, to rely only on imagination to conceive Alevi *deyiş* performed in a manner with little or no reference to Alevi expressive culture; Pir Sultan *deyiş* that are performed in a style far removed from the Alevi music context can be sampled in the jazz arrangements by Senem Diyici of *Ötme bülbül ötme* and *Beni beni (Şu kanlı zalimin ettiği işler)* on her recording *Takalar* (Diyici 2000).

⁵⁵ John Miles Foley (1991b) discusses this concept of extratextual context in respect to oral tradition. It is my view that the study of Alevi expressive lyric culture would benefit from research applying Foley’s notion of “immanent art” (1991a and 2002).

⁵⁶ These recordings do not necessarily represent the earliest popular commercial recordings of Pir Sultan Abdal *deyiş*, however. For example, Muazzez Türüng recorded *Geçti dost kervanı* for Odeon in 1962 (Harman 2007).

⁵⁷ Livaneli writes about the profound effect on him when as a young boy visiting the Çorum region, he heard a *dede* playing the *cura* in the Alevi style and how he later sought out an instrument maker and teacher in Ankara to learn this style (2007:52f.). While Livaneli publishes his novels and other writings under his full name Ömer Zülfür Livaneli, as a musician whose repertoire includes Alevi *deyiş* he omits Ömer, a name which he learned was anathema to Alevi when as a youth he introduced himself to an Alevi *bağlama* maker in Ankara (*ibid.*:54).

a recording of Çınar devoted entirely to Pir Sultan Abdal *deyiş* entitled *Pir Sultan Abdal yeryüzü şarkılar*.⁵⁸

Performances of the songs since the early 1990s have seen, in one direction, the development of dramatic stylized arrangements, for example in the recordings of *Yürü bre Hızır Paşa* by Emre Saltık employing a traditional melody but with vocal and instrumental arrangements used to highlight the dramatic text (*Pir Sultan dostları* 2004; *Bitmeyen türküler* 1991) or the recording by Selda Bağcan (Bağcan and Kaya 1991) of Ali Çağan's purposefully composed melody for this same *deyiş*.⁵⁹ In another direction, there is an emphasis on and move toward performances and arrangements that adopt the more consciously intimate performance and stylistic techniques associated with Alevi ritual music such as *şelpe*,⁶⁰ as demonstrated in the recordings by Ulaş Özdemir (1998), Gani Pekşen (2007), and Muharrem Temiz (2008). Interestingly, historical nostalgia is not evident in the performance of Alevi music, at least in terms of musical sound. By this statement I mean there is no attempt to interpret the songs in a style that tries to re-create the sound of sixteenth-century Anatolia, even if that were actually possible. Even when techniques associated with authentic practice that suggest an older and even worshipful style of performance are introduced—such as playing the *bağlama şelpe* style rather than with a plectrum or using forms of the instrument associated with ritual performance such as the *dede saz*—this practice has generally been in a manner that seeks to develop existing techniques creatively within acceptable bounds. Influential performers such as Arif Sağ are able to be creative and progressive in their techniques while remaining aware of, and attuned to, the defining elements of the referential performance style.⁶¹ Such performances suggest an ambition to be progressive and an interest in achieving a broad audience, thus highlighting a contemporary engagement with and commitment to the relevance of the tradition of which the songs of Pir Sultan Abdal form a significant part.

Conclusion

We can approach an understanding of Pir Sultan Abdal through the various illuminations we draw upon and which ultimately converge to form the perceived persona. Thus we may approach Pir Sultan Abdal as illuminating the continuation of symbolic martyrdom stories; or in the light of the very personal core element of that story played out in his relationship with and

⁵⁸ Curiously, Çınar's recording is the only one of the 1970s recordings mentioned that has not been re-issued on CD at the time of writing. I am grateful to Irene Markoff for noting the omission of Çınar from an earlier draft of this article.

⁵⁹ Çağan has explained that his primary reason for composing the melody was so that this song could reach the people (*halka ulaşması*), believing that the melody should not be of a mystical type but should suit the anger of the song (Çağan 2000).

⁶⁰ A style of playing using the fingers rather than the *tezene* (plectrum).

⁶¹ See Markoff 1986a for a detailed analysis of Sağ's creative approach to the interpretation of traditional performance style.

demise at the hands of Hızır Paşa. We can interpret Pir Sultan through the assumption of his place as a historical identity in the volatile and formative world of sixteenth-century Anatolia, or indeed in other interpretations and speculations. The search for the historical identity, certainly, remains a tantalizing and engaging task, but it is not the critical point since the essentially unknown historical Pir Sultan cannot and does not own the persona of the tradition. The Pir Sultan Abdal persona persists on its own terms—terms asserted most tellingly in the functional possibilities of the *mahlas*, which is a structural convention that, while ostensibly a signature device, provides in the process of transmission over time and in the context of performance a complex, creative, ambiguous, but meaningful relationship between the persona and those with whom his songs interact. Finally, Pir Sultan Abdal persists as a persona of great vitality in the substance of the songs attributed to him and in the interest and attraction they engender for those who would assert their own position, views, creativity, or identity through the maintenance or interpretation of that persona.

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APPENDIX

The translations included here are provided as a modest addition to the very few available English versions of Pir Sultan Abdal lyrics.⁶² Like Andrews (2004) I have considered formal features of the original text, such as rhyme and line length, to be expendable in translation (for good or ill). Unlike Andrews (26) I have not taken the view that footnotes or extraneous explanations “should be avoided at all costs”; nor in making the translations have I felt qualified “to guess at contexts and reflect them in style and tone” (31). I have sought less to make the translations poetic accomplishments in their own right than to provide what I believe are semantically accurate versions. I concur with Halman (2004:45) that “a single translator can hardly do a definitive version,” but that a consort of renditions, that is to say a plurality of voices and versions able to be read together, may ultimately be more effective in working out the meanings of the text in translation. My translations thus represent only a single voice in such a consort of renditions.

⁶² Available published English translations include two in Ferraro and Bolat 2007, three in Menemencioğlu 1978, and two in Silay 1996, the latter being new translations of lyrics already translated in Menemencioğlu 1978. Halman (1992) includes one complete translation in his illustrated edition of Turkish legends and folk poems.

Deyiş example 1

Turkish text from the *Menâkıbu'l-Esrar Behcetü'l-Ahrâr* (Bisâtî 2003:84) in a Latin script edition prepared by Ahmet Taşğın.⁶³

Benim pîrim Şah-ı Merdân Ali'dir My master⁶⁴ is Ali, Shah of the Seven Guides⁶⁵
Selâmını göndür bedr-i sabahdan Send him your greetings by the moon at dawn
Ben tâlibim ne haddim var pîr olam I am a seeker,⁶⁶ how could I dare to be a master
Pîre duâcıyım her gün sabahdan I pray to the master every day in the morning

Ahşam oldu günde gitti yerine Evening time and the sun goes to ground
Tâlib olan kulluk eyler pîrine The seeker does service to his master?
İki musâhibde biri birine Two in companionship, one for each other
Cümle müşkillere yeter sabahdan Enough for all hardship in the morning

Bizim yerde göz dikerler akceye In our land the eye is fixed on the coin
Akceyi virirler gene akcesiye All they give for coin is a coin again
Seher vakti bilbül konar bakceye The nightingale settles in the garden at dawn
Göz yaşını gün döker sabahdan The sun sheds its tears in the morning

Deryalarda biter iki dürdane Two pearls grow in the deep oceans
Biri gevher biri sedef biri dürdane One a gem, one mother-of-pearl, one a pearl
Biz de sığınmışız Şah-ı Merdâna We have refuge with the Shah of the Seven Guides

⁶³ The version of the text from which my translation stems is the Latin script transcription by Ahmet Taşğın. I have not attempted to normalize the text to modern Turkish forms or orthography; so, for example, *bilbül* is not changed to *bülbül* nor *ahşam* to *akşam*. This text given here, which does not appear to have survived in the oral tradition but rather only in the *Menâkıb* manuscript and so cannot be compared with orally transmitted versions, must be understood with the awareness Andrews advises (in respect to Ottoman lyric poetry more generally) that we are often working with “an editor’s version of an already interpreted transcription of a manuscript” (Andrews et al. 1997:13). I am grateful to a reviewer of this paper for valuable critical comments on my original attempt at translating this *deyiş*. While I have been guided by the reviewer’s comments and suggestions, the inevitable shortcomings of the translations remain in every sense my own.

⁶⁴ *Pir* refers to a founding saint of a *tarikât*; or more generally a saint, sage, or master. In this lyric Pir Sultan asserts the central importance of the master-disciple (seeker) relationship intimating at the transmission of authority by expressing his humility to his master (*pîr*) the Imam Ali in the opening verse while declaring his own exalted status in the form of his *mahlas* in the final line.

⁶⁵ *Şâh-ı Merdân* is a common epithet for the Imam Ali. The translator must confront the question whether to translate such constructions. In this case I have chosen to leave *Şah* as the anglicized and functional “Shah” (rather than the translation of “Lord” or “Monarch”) while translating the qualifying element of the *izafet* group that constitutes the epithet. In this context *Merdân* refers to the seven spiritual beings considered the guides or masters of the faithful. The epithet *Şâh-ı Merdân* is significant in Alevi lyric because it identifies Ali as the monarch of all spiritual guides or greatest among men, “*mert insanların en büyüğü*” (Öztelli 1973:16).

⁶⁶ *Tâlip* refers to one who seeks or strives in Alevi ritual culture and who may be understood as a follower or disciple of a specific *dede* lineage.

Cümle müşkillere yeter sabahdan

Enough for all hardship in the morning

Felek bir iş bişirmiş diyar gel ha ic

Fate cooks up something,⁶⁷ so come here and drink

Yüz yıl çalış ariş ahir sonı hiç

Work for a hundred years and for little in the end

Şu dünya kona kondur göce göc

Let that world come to a halt or pass on

Pîr Sultanım gecdi bir gün sabahdan

I am Pir Sultan, he⁶⁸ passed by one day in the morning

⁶⁷ I am grateful to a reviewer of this paper for this felicitous rendering—my original attempt being verbose and vague—and for the suggestion that *diyar* (meaning “country” or “land”) may be an incorrect transcription for *deyr*, meaning “hermitage” or “tavern” (or indeed “monastery” or “temple”) and which also carries the sense of “the world” in respect to mystical concerns. While it is a plausible reading and, with the addition of the dative ending (*deyre*) would neatly fulfill the syllabic requirement of the line, the manuscript as reproduced by Taşğın (Bisâti 2003:175) supports the editor’s transcription as *diyar*.

⁶⁸ *Gecdi* (*geçti*) could effectively be translated here as “who passed,” but I have settled on the more literal reading of “he passed” to highlight the grammatical shift in person common in *deyiş*, especially in respect to the *mahlas* verse. This reading still retains the connection to Pir Sultan while suggesting a degree of distancing—in Ricoeur’s sense of the inscribed expression’s relationship to its potential for autonomy and interpretation—that I suggest is a latent characteristic in this lyric form. Had the verb preceded the name in a position suggesting more clearly a participial function, a translation as “who passed” would have been more compelling.

Deyiş example 2

Turkish text from Gölpınarlı and Boratav (1943:49), collected from Aşık Ali İzzet Özkan (Şarkışla, Sivas region).

<i>Şu kanlı zalimin ettiği işler</i>	Those blood-tainted tyrant's deeds
<i>Garip bülbül gibi zâreler beni</i>	Make me moan like a lonely nightingale
<i>Yağmur gibi yağar başıma taşlar</i>	Stones rain down on my head like a torrent
<i>Dostun bir fiskeşi paralar beni</i>	But it is the friend's mere pinch that breaks me
<i>Dâr günümde dost düşmanım bell'oldu</i>	In my dire days my friend and foe are revealed
<i>On derdim var ise şimdi ell'oldu</i>	My troubles that once were ten are now fifty
<i>Ecel fermanı boynuma takıldı</i>	The order for my death is fixed to my neck
<i>Gerek asa gerek vuralar beni</i>	So let them strike me down or let them hang me
<i>Pir Sultan Abdal'ım can göğe ağmaz</i>	I am Pir Sultan Abdal, the soul ⁶⁹ does not flee
<i>Hak'tan emr olmazsa irahmet yağmaz</i>	If not decreed by God ⁷⁰ mercy does not rain down
<i>Şu illerin taşı hiç bana değmez</i>	The stones of those strangers will never touch me
<i>İlle dostun gülü yaralar beni</i>	But it's the rose of that friend that wounds me

⁶⁹ This could rightly be rendered as "my soul," assuming *can* to refer to Pir Sultan's soul irrespective of the absence of possessive suffix. However, I have preferred a more literal rendering that neither asserts nor disclaims the ownership of the "soul."

⁷⁰ *Hak*, with its deep and encompassing meaning in Turkish, is one of the more problematic concepts to render in English. It may mean "God," "truth," "justice," and "right," and the translator must look to context and purpose to settle on an appropriate rendering.

Deyiş example 3

Turkish text from Gölpınarlı and Boratav (1943:93), collected by Aşık Ali İzzet Özkan from Ali Baba (Şarkışla, Sivas region).

*Bu yıl bu dağların karı erimez
Eser bâd-ı sabâ yel bozuk bozuk
Türkmen kalkıp yaylasına yürümez
Yıkılmış aşiret il bozuk bozuk*

The snow doesn't melt on the mountains this year
The morning breeze blows an ill wind of ruin
The Turkmen no longer start out for the highlands
The nomads have cleared off and the land is in ruin

*Kızıl Irmak gibi çağladım aktım
El vurdum göğsümün bendini yıktım
Gül yüzlü ceranın bağına çıktım
Girdim bahçesine gül bozuk bozuk*

I purred and flowed like the Red River⁷¹
I struck out and threw off the barrage within me
I left the orchard of the rose-faced gazelle
I entered the garden where the rose is in ruin⁷²

*Elim tutmaz güllerini dermeğe
Dilim tutmaz hasta halin sormağa
Dört cevabın manasını vermeğe
Sazım düzen tutmaz tel bozuk bozuk*

I cannot hold his roses for the gathering
I cannot speak of my sickness for the asking
Nor to give the meaning of the sacred books⁷³
My *saz*⁷⁴ untuned, the strings broken and in ruin

*Pir Sultan'ım yaradıldım kul diye
Zâlim Paşa elinden mi öl diye
Dostum beni ismarlamış gel diye
Gideceğim amma yol bozuk bozuk*

I am Pir Sultan, I was created a mere subject
And so to die at the hand of the tyrant Pasha?⁷⁵
My companion commanded me saying come
I will go but the way lies destroyed and in ruin

⁷¹ I have translated *Kızıl Irmak* literally as “Red River,” although this is certainly a reference to the major northern Anatolian river Kızılırmak, which flows from the Köse mountain range east of Sivas, south past Sivas and Nevşehir, making its way northwards to the west of Çorum, and emptying into the Black Sea to the west of Samsun.

⁷² *Bozuk bozuk* with its intensifying repetition has a strong sense of “devastation,” “destruction,” or “complete ruin.” In translating this phrase I have sought to use a repetitive English phrase that will function in all the verses to convey a sense of burden or refrain or the original, although this has not always captured the intensity of the original.

⁷³ *Dört cevap*, literally “the four responses.” I follow Fuat (1999:141) in understanding this as reference to the four sacred books: *Tevrat* (Pentateuch), *İncil* (New Testament), *Zebur* (Psalms of David), and *Kuran* (Koran).

⁷⁴ *Saz* refers to the long-necked lute sacred to Alevi culture. I chose not to translate *saz* as “lute,” though such a translation is simple and organologically accurate, in order to avoid suggestion of the courtly lute-playing minstrel or troubadour of Western tradition.

⁷⁵ Generally understood as a reference to Pir Sultan Abdal's nemesis Hızır Paşa; see again Fuat 1999:141.