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## Voice and Recitation Among Shi'i Muslims in Turkey

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# Diversity and Contact among Singer-Poet Traditions in Eastern Anatolia

edited by Ulaş Özdemir

Wendelmoet Hamelink

Martin Greve





Diversity and Contact  
among Singer-Poet Traditions  
in Eastern Anatolia

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ORIENT-INSTITUT ISTANBUL

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among Singer-Poet Traditions  
in Eastern Anatolia

Edited by  
Ulaş Özdemir  
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# “*Hüseyn’im Vay!*”: Voice and Recitation in Contemporary Turkish Shi’ism

*Stefan Williamson Fa*

Kars is quite unlike any other city in Turkey. What is most immediately striking is the city’s grid-like pattern based around eight principal roads, and its Imperial Russian architecture. At the geographical intersection between Anatolia and the Caucasus, Kars has a long and complex history under different empires, rulers and people. Like many other borderlands, this has led to a complex history of migration, emigration, settlement, coexistence and conflict, all of which have left marks on the city and its soundscape.

Historically, the movement of people and culture between Anatolia and Caucasus has been relatively fluid, a fact which is exemplified in the tradition of *âşîks*, bardic minstrels who once travelled between the urban centres of Kars, Tbilisi, Yerevan and beyond, reciting poetry and epics and playing the long necked lute known as the *saz*. Even during the Soviet period, the sound of *âşîks* travelled across the relatively sealed border with people in Kars reportedly tuning into radio broadcasts from Yerevan and Baku every Sunday to listen to the latest recordings of *âşîks* from the Soviet Caucasus. Cassette recordings of folk and popular singers from Iranian Azerbaijan were also present in stores in the city centre at that time (Erdener, 1995).

The city and wider province has long been home to different religious communities and denominations. Late 19th century Russian censuses show that the city’s population consisted predominantly of Armenians and Russians, with smaller numbers of Turks and Caucasian Greeks. Today, the city is composed of an ethnolinguistically diverse, yet almost entirely Muslim population. The population is said to be just under 80,000, made up mostly of three self-differentiating Turkic groups: “*yerli*” (literally: ‘natives’ but referring to ‘unmarked’ Sunni Anatolian Turks), Azeri (who are mostly the descendants of immigrants who arrived in the city from present day Armenia during the period 1878 to 1920 and distinguish themselves on the basis of sectarian, *mezhep*, affiliation), and Terekeme (who trace their origins to the Caucasus but are predominantly Sunni) as well as Kurmanji speaking Sunni Kurds.

In this chapter, I introduce the genres of lament that are central to Azeri Shi’i (*Cafêri*) ritual life in Kars<sup>1</sup>. I begin by arguing the need for these genres to be un-

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<sup>1</sup> Research for this chapter is based on over a year of fieldwork between 2014 and 2016, largely focused in the town of Kars, as well as other parts of Turkey, Iran and Azerbaijan. In

derstood along a wider nexus of oral performance traditions in the region. After providing a brief summary of the Shi'i community in Turkey I go on to describe the rituals and oral performance genres central to Muharram ritual mourning. The final part of the chapter deals directly with the changing practices of Shi'i recitation in Turkey and the influence of transnational media and professional reciters, known as *meddab*, from Iranian Azerbaijan and the Republic of Azerbaijan. By presenting this material here, I highlight the significance of vernacular oral performance in devotional life in Eastern Anatolia. Rather than rigid, fixed and unchanging, a deeper ethnographic understanding of these forms of oral performance expose the changing, dynamic and often creative nature of ritual and religiosity.

### *Oral Performance*

The singer poet traditions of *âşık* and *dengbêj* bards, still popular today, with their emphasis on storytelling and the recounting of epics are a testament of the importance of oral performance in Eastern Anatolia and the Caucasus. The popularity of *âşiks* often transcended ethnic and sectarian divisions as a common form of entertainment. These bards came from different backgrounds and participated in the song duelling traditions of *âşık* coffee houses and often could only be distinguished by their accents or the themes of their lyrics. Erdener (2015 pers.comm) recalled an incident in which a Sunni Terekeme *âşık* travelled to a Shi'i Azeri village. Upon realising that the audience was not interested in the tales he was reciting the *âşık* began improvising lyrics on the theme of Imam Husayn to which he received great admiration and left the village with a handsome fee.

Such an incident also reminds us of the fact that oral traditions have rarely been neatly divided into categories of secular and sacred. *Âşiks* would often draw on Islamic and mystical themes in their performance and as ways of legitimising their practice (Erdener, 1995). Within this larger soundscape of multi-ethnic multi-denominational singer poets in Eastern Anatolia the lesser known devotional genres of Shi'i oral performance have received little scholarly attention. The various forms of vocalised melodic lamentation performed to commemorate the martyrdom of Imam Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet and third rightful Imam in Shi'i belief, at Karbala, are arguably part of this larger shared aesthetic and poetic register of oral performance found across the region.

Within Shi'i communities across the world, the central and shared sounds of the recitation of the Qur'an and the adhan (*ezan*), exist amongst vocalised suppli-

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addition to regular participant observation at mosques, private *medis* and other gatherings, much of the material presented here was obtained via interviews with a broad range of individuals and members of the community, including professional *meddab* and amateur reciters.

cations (*dua*), laments (*mersiye*, *sinezen*, *noba*) and songs of joy and celebration (*molodi*, *ilahi*), which are connected to time and place and generally focus on the remembrance of the Ahl al-Bayt<sup>2</sup>. Within Twelver Shi'ism there is a surprising consistency in content and form of these genres worldwide. Yet, a huge diversity in style correlates with the wide geographic distributions of these communities. Many of these genres go beyond the fixed holy scripture of the Qur'an and Hadith and represent vernacular devotional traditions with diverse influence and currents. Lyrics are drawn from diverse sources, including specialised poets. While instruments are generally not used to accompany recitation, the melodisation of texts often involves highly aestheticised techniques and styles of vocal performance.

These forms of devotional recitation share certain characteristics with other singer poet traditions in the region. As oral performance their embodied nature can be contrasted with printed text and literature. They share similar performance context as they are fixed in time and space as unrepeatable events which involve the physical presence of audiences and performers. The nature of performance entails a certain fluidity of text and content which is due to the unpredictability of the interactive feedback cycle between listeners and performers. Like the bardic traditions of *âşık* and *dengbêj*, the forms of recitation discussed here tend to rely on memory—the ability to remember lyrics and narratives are central to the art of successful performance. While the oral component of vernacular recitation is central to its transmission and performance, it is important to note that the “oral” and “written” are never mutually exclusive (Sterne, 2011; Hess, 2015). As shown below, recitation involves the combination of textual and oral transmission and, more recently, diverse new forms of media.

### *Shi'ism in Eastern Anatolia*

Azeris<sup>3</sup> are Turkic-speakers whose language is mutually intelligible with Modern Turkish, living mainly in the Republic of Azerbaijan and in Iran<sup>4</sup>. In Turkey, they are estimated to number between 500,000 and 2 million (Shaffer, 2002: 221), though figures are hard to verify given the fluidity of the concept of ethnicity in the country. Azeris in Turkey are predominantly followers of *Caferi* (Ja'fari jurisprudence) Twelver Shi'ism, while Turkey is a majority (Hanafi) Sunni country.

<sup>2</sup> Ahl al-Bayt (Turkish: *Ehli Beyt*) is a phrase meaning, literally, “People of the House” or “Family of the House”. The term refers to the family of the Prophet Muhammad.

<sup>3</sup> Azeri and Azerbaijani are often used interchangeably though since the independence of the Republic of Azerbaijan Azerbaijani has come to signify citizens of that Republic. Azeris in Turkey refer to themselves as *Azeri* or *Azeri Türkler* (Azeri Turks).

<sup>4</sup> In the Republic of Azerbaijan, ethnic Azerbaijanis account for close to 91% of the population of 8.1 million. In the neighbouring Republic of Georgia, there are approximately 300,000 Azerbaijanis. The largest number of Azerbaijanis today, up to an estimated 20 million live in the Islamic Republic of Iran. (Shaffer, 2002: 224)

Turkey's Azeri community has historically settled in the area which today borders Armenia, Nakhchivan and Iran; the largest city being Kars. They make up around 30–40% of the total population of Kars city and province, and are the largest group in the neighbouring province of Iğdır (Üzüm, 1993). Those living in Kars are mostly descended from the population expelled from Soviet Armenia following the exchanges of 1918–25 (Andrews, 1989: 74). Since the 1970s, parallel to the rising migration in Turkey from rural to urban areas, there has been a steady flow of migration to the industrialised city centres of Western Turkey.

The spread of Shi'ism in Eastern Anatolia and the Caucasus is inseparable from the Islamisation of the area but became particularly strong during the initial years of the Safavid state and Shah Ismail's patronage of Shi'ism in the region. Shi'i identity today in Turkey is not formally forbidden. Yet, the sheer diversity of Shi'ism and the homogenous ethnic and religious character of the official narrative of national identity, have worked to suppress knowledge or visibility of Turkish Shi'ism<sup>5</sup>. Eastern Anatolian Azeris are fairly unknown within Turkey and few appreciate the sectarian difference between Azerbaijanis and other Turks. Within the literature on ethnic and religious groups there also appears to be some confusion. For example, van Bruinessen (1996) incorrectly includes Azeri Shi'ah within his description of Alevi groups of Turkey. Azeris generally reject labelling of their beliefs and practices under Alevism, and prefer to distinguish themselves as *Caferi*. Obviously, not all Azeris embrace Shi'ism or Islam as part of their identity, and amongst those who do, not all participate in the mourning rituals or show interest in the genres of recitation I refer to in this text.

### *Lamenting Karbala*

The martyrdom of Husayn b. 'Ali b. Abi Talib, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad and third Imam, is a historical and cosmological turning point for Shi'ah. The massacre in the desert of Karbala, present day Iraq, was born out of the continued dispute over political and spiritual succession to the Prophet Muhammad after his death in 632CE. After Yazid had demanded that Husayn abdicate his right to succession Husayn was encouraged by his supporters to travel to Kufa where they could organise and lead a challenge to the caliph. On the way, Husayn and his seventy-two followers, were surrounded and besieged for three days on the desert sands of Karbala, near the banks of the Euphrates River. Husayn's party were deprived of water during the siege and attacked by thousands of Umayyad soldiers who brutally dismembered and decapitated the Imam

<sup>5</sup> Shi'ah in Turkey have struggled over the status of their mosques as the Religious Affairs Department does not recognise the status of *Caferi* (and other non-Hanafi Sunni) communities, and have attempted to bring their mosques under state control. Since the 1980s several *Caferi* organisations and associations have come into existence. In Kars there are three Shi'i mosques, the first having been founded in 1952.

and his supporters on the tenth day of the month of Muharram, the day now referred to as Ashura (*Aşura Günü*). The massacre was much more than the slaughter of those loyal supporters of the family of the Prophet by an overwhelming military force. Instead the tragedy is seen as an ideological battle between the just over the unjust, the principled over the corrupted, making Husayn into the figure of the ultimate tragic hero. Husayn's innocence, infallibility and holiness, in the minds of the Shi'ah, adds to the cosmological significance of his martyrdom.

The commemoration of Imam Husayn's martyrdom began soon after the tragic event and Shi'i practice and theology has developed in contemplation of the historical details of the narrative. Within Shi'ism an understanding of redemption and mediation has for centuries inspired the development of tradition. Through its many vernacular variations, different rituals have been developed to maintain communication between the mundane and spiritual worlds. The use of aesthetic expressions to elicit lamentation and weeping in Muharram rituals is a well documented phenomenon (Ayoub, 1978).

In Turkey, commemorations of Imam Husayn's martyrdom were held on and off by Iranian traders in the Sunni Ottoman capital Istanbul (And 1979: 238–254) until 1923 when such enactments were forbidden for being 'too violent and unworthy of a civilised country' according to both Persian intellectuals in the city and the young Turkish Republic (Zarconne and Zarinebaf, 1993). However, mourning during Muharram was not restricted to the Shi'i traders in the city. Within Ottoman Turkish literature the genre of *mersiye* is said to have developed from the 15th century onwards. From its Arabic and Persian origins *mersiye* poetry became a broad genre, used to lament the deaths of important individual figures including sultans, as well as close friends and family members (Isen, 1993). *Mersiye* dedicated to Imam Husayn appear in Ottoman divan literature as well as in the more popular literature of the sufi lodges (*tekke*) from the same time (Çağlayan, 1997). A strong tradition existed of the vocalised recitation of *mersiye* within the Sufi lodges of various orders. This was especially common at ceremonies during the period of Muharram. These recitations, unlike some other forms of hymns (*ilahi*), would be recited in a melodised form without the use of any instruments out of respect for the martyrs of Karbala. Sebilici Hüseyin Efendi (1894–1975), of whom recordings still exist, is often referred to as the last Ottoman *mersiyehan*, a specialist in reciting *mersiye*.

The diverse Alevi-Bektashi<sup>6</sup> communities living across Anatolia have also maintained a wide range of traditions and forms of lamenting Karbala. The genre

<sup>6</sup> The amalgamation of Shi'ism and Alevism is extremely problematic and often rejected by Alevis themselves. Scholars within Turkey and beyond have long emphasized the distinctiveness of Alevism and the history of Shi'i ideas in Turkey (Zarconne, 2004; Cahen, 1970). Shi'ah and Alevis have a number of beliefs in common, but distinguish themselves very clearly in their religious rituals.

of *mersiye* features prominently in Alevi Muharram rituals and in the central communal worship service (*cem*) held throughout the year (Özdemir, 2016). *Mersiye*, here, communicates the same narrative and event, but differs significantly in style and form from both the Twelver Shi'i and the Ottoman forms. The Alevi *mersiye* represents a distinct but connected oral tradition in which the poetic lament is often accompanied by a long necked lute (*bağlama*).

### *The Meclis-Voice and Space*

The ritual commemoration of the Battle of Karbala during Muharram is fundamental to Azeri Shi'i religious expression and identity in Kars, yet has long been affected and restricted by the social and political climate at the time. Locals often recount how during the early Republican period and years of military rule, all Muharram rituals were forced underground and carried out in secret at people's homes or out of the town and village centres. However, over the last 20 years, these rituals have gradually moved from the private sphere of houses to mosques and, since 1992, an Ashura procession has been held annually through the streets of the city centre, attracting thousands of participants and onlookers.

Amongst Azeri Shi'ah in Kars, mourning begins on the first night of Muharram with mourning gatherings (*matem meclisi*) which are held for nine nights, ending on the eve of Ashura (*tasua*), at the three mosques across the city and at the private houses of sayyids (*seyid*), direct descendants of the Prophet. Families fill the mosques as the sun begins to set with the *meclis* commencing after the evening prayers (*akşam namazı*). The mosques are physically transformed during the month of Muharram, black banners and flags, usually brought back by pilgrims returning from Iran and Iraq, are draped from the minarets and cover the walls of the interior prayer space. Ad hoc sound systems are also set up in the mosques during this period; speakers, microphones and amplifiers are brought in by different members of the congregation to ensure the volume of the recitation is adequate for the event.

The *meclis* typically consists of three main parts, the recitation of *sinezen*, a sermon and the recitation of *mersiye*: The genre of *sinezen*<sup>7</sup> is one of the most widespread sounded forms of religious expression in the Shi'i world. *Sinezen* is a form of poetic lamentation which aligns rhythmically with the beating of the chests or self-flagellation with chains by a group of participants known as a *deste*. Different movements and methods of beating the chest or hitting the back with the chains are adopted to match the different metres of the text of the vocal recitation.

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<sup>7</sup> *Sinezen* comes from the Persian *Sine-zani* meaning striking the chest. In Turkish the verb *sine vurmak* is used for the action of beating the chest while *sinezen* refers to the genre of rhythmic recitation.

During the *sinezen* portion of the *meclis*, a single reciter stands at the head of the *deste* narrating the rhythmic verses to which those gathered often join in call and response sections or during repeated choruses. The repertoire of *sinezen* varies from night to night, often corresponding to a particular figure among Husayn's companions at Karbala, though the most popular texts and melodies tend to be repeated throughout the ten days.

Reciters in Kars, generally known as *sinezenci* or *destebaşı*, are usually chosen for their vocal skills; some are also popular local wedding musicians who give up secular music for the period between the start of Muharram and Arba'een<sup>8</sup>. *Sinezen* at these gatherings are particularly loud and energetic, being especially popular with the younger male members of the congregation whose vigorous body movements are in sharp contrast to the somber poses of the older men seated around the mosque. The reverb-soaked recitation of the *sinezenci* is punctuated by the percussive rhythms and fleshy thuds of hands beating chests or the rattle and whip of chains hitting the cloth on the men's backs, sounds which are not contained by the thin walls of the mosques but resonate onto the streets. Through voice and embodied rhythm the martyrs of Karbala are commemorated, remembered, amplified and sounded throughout the neighbourhoods of Kars.

Melodised narrations of the Battle of Karbala, known as *mersiye* are the climax of *meclis*. They are the emotional and ritual heart of the evening. Originating from the Arabic word for lament (*marsiyya*), *mersiye*, as seen above, is the general name used and given by Shi'ah and Alevis in Turkey and Azerbaijan to the intoned recitations recounting the battle of Karbala and the life and suffering of the family of the prophet (*Ehli beyt*). While in Iran and Azerbaijan *mersiye* and *sinezen* are recited by specialised *meddab*<sup>9</sup>, in Turkey, *mersiye* are almost exclusively recited by imams or sayyids who have received religious education in Iran or Iraq. The recitation can be either melodised or non-melodic, yet it is deeply emotional and draws on both wider Shi'i Islamic traditions and Azeri sounded and poetic forms. *Mersiye* focuses specifically on the suffering of Imam Husayn and his companions at Karbala; it is more descriptive than the *sinezen* and the narrative form expresses the suffering from thirst and hunger of Husayn and the bravery and daring deeds of the battle. The vocalisation combines the recitation of poetry, often in the first person, of those who were at Karbala, with loud weeping, again heavily amplified, aimed at provoking an emotional response from the listeners sitting in the mosque.

<sup>8</sup> Arba'een, known as Erbain or İmamın Qırkı locally, occurs forty days after the Day of Ashura and marks the end of the mourning period for Imam Huseyn.

<sup>9</sup> The Turkish word *meddab* comes from an Arabic word which means "panegyrist" and was used by Ottoman Turks and Persians to designate the professional story-tellers of the urban milieu. The *meddab* originally recited episodes from the Shahname but later came to be known for relating the acts and deeds of important figures in Islam (Boratav, 2012).



The *meclis* combines different forms of melodised and narrated speech and poetry, moving between different registers of speech in different languages. The opening sermon explaining the topic and meaning of the *mersiye* is given in formal Turkish and in a direct style. This is followed by the melodised and emotionally charged first person narrative of the *mersiye* recitation, which is based on Azeri Turkish poetry and uses the informal local Azeri dialect to create a sense of emotional intimacy. The *meclis* ends with a reading from the Qur'an the religious efficacy of Arabic concluding and asking for the prayers and tears of those gathered to be accepted. Those congregated leave the mosque, shaking hands and departing with the phrase '*Allah kabul etsin*', 'may God accept your prayers'. The *deste* groups are often invited to houses after the *meclis* to recite and beat *sinezen*, with the aim of bringing blessings to the house for the rest of the year.

### *Genres of Lamentation*

Unlike other parts of the Shi'i world where literary and written texts circulate as part of a high culture of mourning, in Eastern Anatolia the poetry for lamentation has generally been transmitted through oral performance. Despite the existence of many examples of Turkish language *maktel*, martyrdom texts, and literary works around the theme of the martyrdom of Imam Huseyn in Karbala, Shi'ah in Kars have had relatively little access to this literature and have instead relied on lyrics from anonymous poets that have been transmitted orally across generations.

Until recently, the genre of *sinezen* in the Shi'i villages and centre of Kars and İğdır were limited to fairly simple rhymes and rhythmic patterns of chest beating, which were repeated year after year and transmitted orally. This type of call and response *sinezen* (Table 1.) is known as "*şahse vahse*", or "*şak-şe*".<sup>10</sup> To recite these the *deste* would form two lines facing each other. One line would call out a verse or phrase and the other respond; for example one side would say "*Şah Hüseyin*" the other would reply with "*Vah Hüseyin*".

<sup>10</sup> The popularity of the slogan "*Şah Hüseyin, Vah Hüseyin*" has also led to these older *sinezen* being referred to as, a corrupted shorter version of the phrase coming from the vocalised form.

Table 1. An example of lyrics (anonymous) from the older call and response style of *sinezen*. Collected in Kars, Turkey, in October 2015.

<b>Sinezenci:</b> <i>Yezid minip danasına,</i>	<b>Sinezenci:</b> Yezid rides a cow,
<b>Deste grubu:</b> <i>Nehlet onun anasına</i>	<b>Deste group:</b> May his mother be damned
<b>Sinezenci:</b> <i>Ay ışığı süit kimin</i>	<b>Sinezenci:</b> In the light of the moon,
<b>Deste grubu:</b> <i>Yezid uluyur it kimin</i>	<b>Deste group:</b> Yezid howls like a dog
<b>Sinezenci:</b> <i>Kanlı kılıç Kerbela'da pas tutar!</i>	<b>Sinezenci:</b> The bloodied sword rusts in Karbala!
<b>Deste grubu:</b> <i>Melikeler aḡam için yas tutar!</i>	<b>Deste group:</b> The angels mourn for my master!
<b>Sinezenci:</b> <i>Ey bi kefen</i>	<b>Sinezenci:</b> <i>A shroud</i>
<b>Deste grubu:</b> <i>Hüseyn Vay!</i>	<b>Deste group:</b> <i>Oh Husayn!</i>
<b>Sinezenci:</b> <i>Susuz olan</i>	<b>Sinezenci:</b> The thirsty!
<b>Deste grubu:</b> <i>Hüseyn Vay!</i>	<b>Deste group:</b> Oh Husayn!
<b>Sinezenci:</b> <i>Mazlum Olan</i>	<b>Sinezenci:</b> The wronged!
<b>Deste grubu:</b> <i>Hüseyn'im Vay!</i>	<b>Deste group:</b> Oh my Husayn!

These examples and others like it suggest that the prevalent form of *sinezen* in the past was based on simple rhymes and used everyday language, with little melodic and lyrical elaboration or depth. The simplicity of such recitation meant that the role of the *sinezenci* was not specialised. The reciter was only required to have a good voice and memorise the simple lyrics. These were transmitted orally from year to year and little effort was made to elaborate on the texts. As mentioned above, the role of *sinezenci* has often been taken on by musicians, yet, an important distinction is made between the recitation of lament poetry and singing. This is particularly clear in the verbs used distinguishing the reading (*okumak*) of *sinezen* and *mersiye* and singing (*şarkı söylemek*). In practice, however, there is slip-page between the secular and the sacred as *sinezenci* may appropriate melodies from 'sad' (*büzünlü*) songs with little opposition. Examples of this range from the use of folk melodies, such as *Sarı Gelin*, to the more surprising and not so subtle

adaption of pop lyrics and melodies, including the song *Usta* by Arabesk singer Müslüm Gürses.

The recitation of *mersiye* elegies today is mostly left to local clergy members as their longer narrative form relies on a more detailed knowledge of the events at Karbala, as transmitted orally or written in Turkish, Persian or Arabic texts. According to local elders, in the past the recitation of *mersiye* would often take place at homes and were performed by specialised *mersiyeban* who would be commissioned to narrate the suffering of the *Ehli Beyt* in poetic form as a spiritual vow or offering. The recitation of *mersiye*, is not based on a single literary text rather, a combination of improvised (*doğaçlama*) lament and lines of memorised text or orally transmitted poetry. The recitation of the narrative of Karbala in the form and function of *mersiye* is much more complex than the recitation of *sinezen*. Affective recitation relies on the complex weaving of poetry, narrative with vocal technique to ensure an emotional response from listeners.

As mentioned above, the *mersiye* begins with a spoken introduction which takes on a familiar sermonising tone, similar to the Friday sermon (*hutbe*), in which lessons and meanings are explicated from the events at Karbala. The narrative or particular incident from the Karbala events for the *mersiye* is introduced slowly in spoken voice in this section, often referencing the *mersiye* recited at the previous *meclis*. On each of the first nine nights of Muharram the reciter adds and builds on the larger narrative which climaxes in the account of Husayn's martyrdom, usually recited on the night of *Tasua*. As the narrative begins to take prominence a clear transition is made from the spoken non-melodic introduction into the melodised recitation, which is announced and marked with the intoned Arabic phrase '*Assalamu alaika ya Aba Abdillab*' (meaning 'Peace be upon you, Oh Imam Husayn!'). Unlike the more elaborate melodisation of specialised *meddah* elsewhere, discussed below, the local recitation tends to follow a very simple melodic style repeating a descending mode<sup>11</sup> within a small pitch range, identical to folk funeral lamentation in the area. In this section the reciter may incorporate verses from written *mersiye* poetry, usually from sheet of handwritten notes copied from printed volumes of poetry prepared for each night. The most popular references for *mersiye* recitation are collections of Azeri Turkish devotional poetry originating in Ardabil, Iran, by specialised poets (*Ehli Beyt Şairi*) such as Rahim Monsevi (1937–1991), Abbas Gholi Yahyevi (1901–1979). Books of poetry by these authors are quite scarce locally as they were brought back by individuals who travelled to Iran for their studies or pilgrimage. Despite the shared language, the Perso-Arabic script used in these publications makes such texts relatively inaccessible to lay people, adding to the significance of the oral recitation during the *meclis*. Like many other forms of poetry the text of *mersiye*

<sup>11</sup> Reciters of *mersiye* in Kars have no formal musical education and do not recite according to any fixed mode. Despite the fact that recitation of *mersiye* is not categorised as a form of music the terms *makam* and *avaz* are used locally to refer to the melodisation.

poetry is written to be read aloud to an audience where the performance of listening, communal weeping, vocalised responses, such as the exclamation of remorse for Husayn ('*Vay Husayn*') and condemnation of the perpetrator ('*lanet olsun Yezid'e!*'), are intrinsic to the *medlis* and create a dynamic feedback cycle between reciter and listener. The emotional impact of the recitation derives from both the words/text and the quality of voice, melodisation and weeping.

Blum's (2005) work on singers in *ta'ziyeh* highlights the complexity of these forms of religious lamentation, as they are required to learn and invent melodies that can accommodate verses in specific metres. As in Blum's study, many of the individuals who recite *mersiye* acquire a sense of how to coordinate tunes and poetic meters without any formal education or instruction and do not engage in sustained discussion on the topic. The way that individuals recite *mersiye* has similarities with other singer poet traditions, especially as their long narrative structure is not dissimilar to epics. In Parry (1987) and Lord's (1960) groundbreaking work on the oral composition and performance of epics they observed how oral poets weave texts together by using formulas, themes, meters, rhythms, and repetitive structures, conventions which also operate in the performance and tradition of *mersiye*. Yet, these forms of performance and tradition are not unchanging. In what is left of this chapter I discuss the changes in contemporary lamentation with particular attention given to the influence of new media and transnationalism in these practices.

### Meddah, *Music and Media*

The last few decades have seen widespread changes which have led to widespread changes in Shi'i recitation in Turkey. The increase in the number of people going to study in Qom and on pilgrimage to Iran, Iraq and Syria meant that more individuals from Turkey began to come into contact with other Shi'i ritual traditions. During the 1980s and 90s, cassettes of Shi'i lamentation were often brought back from such travels and they were copied and shared. Recordings of Azeri language *meddah*, such as Salim Muezzinzade from Ardabil, Iran, became particularly sought after. Since the late 1980s moreover, local poets began writing poetry which, together with the relaxation on censorship of religious material, the opening of Shi'i publishing houses and the ubiquity of cassette recordings, contributed to the spread of a distinct repertoire of Azeri Turkish poetry across Shi'i communities in Turkey.

One of the most popular poets of this era was a librarian from Iğdır, Hüseyin Yalçın (b. 1953 d. 2014), who took on the title of poet of the Ahl al-Bayt (*Ehli Beyt Şairi*) and dedicated himself to writing and publishing his own works commemorating Imam Husayn and the lives of the Ahl al-Bayt. Yalçın's poetry

marked a move away from the simple rhyming call and response style of traditional *sinezen* and proved extremely popular (Table 2.).

Along with a move away from the use of local dialect and to a more formal register of language influenced by Modern Turkish, his poetry contained intricate references to details and figures from the Karbala narrative, no doubt a result of his own religious studies. These poems were written explicitly for recitation as either *sinezen* or *mersiye*. This is seen in the rhythm and structure of the texts, where chorus sections (*nakarat*), for *sinezen*, were often marked in publication, but he was also known to recite himself during Muharram or instruct reciters on how to melodise the texts. Despite the move towards publication of poetry and texts since the 1980s the vocalisation, melodisation and recitation of these texts has remained their central purpose.

Table 2. Lyrics from a popular *sinezen* ‘*Şabı vefa Ebelfezl*’ (The king of loyalty ‘Abū al-Fādl) about ‘Abū al-Fādl Al-Abbas, Husayn’s half-brother, written by Hüseyin Yalçın. The chorus (*nakarat*) and melody is taken from a Persian language recording of a *sinezen* which circulated in the early 1990s. A recited version of Yalçın’s text was recorded and produced in a studio by a contemporary *meddab* from Kars, Halil Çelik, in 2014 and has circulated widely amongst Azeri Shi’ah in Turkey and the diaspora making it one of the most regularly recited *sinezen* during Muharram.

### *Şabı vefa Ebelfezl*

*Şabı vefa Ebelfezl [Nakarat]*  
*Ebelfezl Ebelfezl Ebelfezl*

*Kim bu pehlivan?*  
*Alem olup beyran*  
*Zehra eşgine*  
*Huseyn’e veren can*  
*Huseyn’e veren can*

*Soyu Heyder-i*  
*Vefanın Zirvesi*  
*İsmi Ebelfezl*  
*Huseyn’in nökeri*  
*Huseyn’in nökeri*

*Aşk meydanında*  
*Safları yanında*  
*Babası Heyder*  
*Sanki Kerbela’da*  
*Sanki Kerbela’da*

*Hayrandır herkes*  
*Ama beni bilmez*  
*Divane oldum*  
*Eşgine Ebelfezl*  
*Eşgine Ebelfezl*

### The King of Loyalty ‘Abū al-Fādl

The King of Loyalty ‘Abū al-Fādl [*Chorus*]  
‘Abū al-Fādl ‘Abū al-Fādl ‘Abū al-Fādl

Who is this heroic man?  
The standard bearer  
Who gave his life  
for the tears of Zehra and Husayn  
for the tears of Zehra and Husayn

The son of *Haydar*  
The peak of loyalty  
His name is ‘Abū al-Fādl  
Husayn’s comrade-in-arms  
Husayn’s comrade-in-arms

On the battlefield of love,  
side by side in their ranks,  
as though his father, *Haydar*,  
were in Karbala  
were in Karbala

All admire him  
But they don’t know me  
As I have gone mad  
For the tears of ‘Abū al-Fādl  
For the tears of ‘Abū al-Fādl

The independence of the Republic of Azerbaijan in 1991 also led to new contact between communities in Turkey and both the bordering Azerbaijani enclave of Nakhchivan and the Azerbaijan mainland. By the early 2000s, those travelling to Azerbaijan from Turkey were able to collect CDs of *meddab* and books containing Latin alphabet Azerbaijani collections of *sinezen* and *mersiye*, which were much easier to read than Arabic alphabet Azeri texts from Iran.

The most significant development has been the recent spread of videos and recordings online. Today, videos of Muharram ceremonies, mourning assemblies and studio recordings of *meddab* from Iran, Republic of Azerbaijan and other parts of Turkey are widely available on online video platforms, such as Youtube, and are constantly shared on social media. The quality of these audio and video recordings and montages is extremely diverse. They range from high quality studio productions, usually 'a capella' accompanied by the sound of chest beating or snare drums to camera-phone recordings of *meclis* gatherings. In addition to the abundance of amateur recordings, many Shi'i organisations and mosques in Turkey have an active web presence. Over the last decades a number of Shi'i television channels have opened in Turkey and are another source of the spread of recordings of popular *sinezen* and *mersiye*.

The proliferation of recordings has had a profound effect on practices of recitation, listening and devotion at a local level. The more devout may listen to these recordings throughout the year. However, during Muharram the recordings take a more prominent role in the soundscape of Kars, where they can be heard blaring out of car windows and out of the speakers at mosques and homes. These recordings have also become a central tool for *sinezençi*, who listen to them obsessively, copying down the words in notebooks and learning to recite them by ear.

The influence of high quality recordings of recitation from Azerbaijan and Iran has led to the re-specialisation of recitation in Turkey. Since the 1990s young reciters from Kars and Iğdır have begun to write and recite their own poetry during Muharram, with some, the most popular being Halil Çelik (b. 1985) and Ali Kaçan (b.1986), even producing full length albums of *sinezen* in studios in Ankara and Istanbul. This process of writing, reciting and recording has reenergised recitation and transformed the *meclis* in Turkey to the extent that some individuals have begun to refer to themselves as *meddab*. This new wave of *meddab* have taken huge influence from Shi'ah reciters and eulogists from across the globe but are also involved in their own creative processes of appropriating, translating, writing and composing. Through this process they have revived and reconfigured the craft of devotional performances in ways that represent meaningful ways of lamenting Karbala in contemporary Turkey.

### *Concluding Remarks*

In this chapter I have described the vernacular performative traditions of Shi'i mourning in Kars, Turkey. I began by tracing the oral traditions of Muharram mourning in Turkey before offering a more ethnographic description of practices of lamentation amongst Azeri Shi'ah in the city of Kars. I then traced the recent changes in these performance traditions, in terms of the development of poetry, form and the use of media. The recent re-specialisation of recitation in the community brought about as a result of these new media forms and technologies raise many further questions for the study of these sonic forms of devotion. Though the circulation of texts, reciters, melodies and ideas are not new in this border region the development of new media has had a profound impact on forms of oral performance. Studying and observing these changes and transformation are central to questions of embodiment in religion and the role of sound and music in devotional life.

Furthermore, by discussing these practices of recitation in the framework of other singer poet traditions in the region, I have drawn attention not only to the need to engage seriously with the oral, acoustic and aesthetic in the lives of Muslims but also to the wider connections and influences between vernacular religious practice and other forms of performance, poetry and expression.

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