Abstract: Âşıks, renowned for their adeptness at improvisational poetry, are viewed as the inheritors of certain shamanic functions within historical contexts. Originally, shamans assumed diverse roles encompassing poetry, medicine, and priesthood before social and religious transformations prompted a gradual shift of the poetic responsibilities, first to individuals termed ozan (bards) and later to âşık, beginning from the 15th to 16th centuries. Âşıks share parallels with shamans in their upbringing, developmental stages toward âşıklık (bardhood), and esteemed societal positions. Their reverence for deceased masters becomes evident in their artistic presentations, wherein they express homage to the memories, and consequently the spirits, of their masters by reciting the works of esteemed âşık masters, notably Köröglü, during their performances. This practice, referred to as “usta mali söylemek” (the performance of the masters’ poems and folk songs) within the Turkish âşık tradition, represents an endeavor to establish a connection with the spirits of ancestors. The resemblance between the tradition of âşıks evolving within the master–apprentice dynamic and shamans invoking the spirits of departed ancestors, embarking on celestial and subterranean journeys empowered by them, and the âşıks’ homage to their masters’ spirits through recitations of their works, thereby sensing their masters’ influence by engaging with them, is striking. This study explores the extent to which contemporary âşıks consciously embrace this resemblance. To this end, a sample group of 34 âşıks residing in diverse regions of Türkiye was interviewed, and the acquired data were analyzed using the document analysis method. Accordingly, all the âşıks who participated in the study were nurtured within the tradition of the master–apprentice relationship akin to shamans. They diligently sought to evoke the spirits of their masters during their performances by reciting masters’ poems and songs, reminiscent of shamans invoking the spirits of deceased shaman ancestors through prayers resembling divine verses. Furthermore, while variations specific to different regions and age groups existed among these âşıks, it was observed that consciously reciting the poems of their masters elevated the masters’ spirits. Simultaneously, they harbored concerns about the potential harm that neglecting this practice might inflict upon the tradition, themselves, and their surroundings.

Keywords: Turkish folk poetry; shamanism; kam; ozan; bard; Köröglü

1. Introduction

Within the rich tradition of Turkish oral poetry, âşıks emerge as artists endowed with exceptional talents, weaving improvised poems with skillful ease. Inspired by a given rhyme, they swiftly craft new verses, often accompanying their recitations with the melodious strains of a saz. The saz, which is a stringed musical instrument, is made of wood and played with a plectrum. It has a fretted handle known as a trough attached to the body. The saz is considered to be the current form of the “kopuz”, which was used among Turks in the past. Today, it is also known as a “bağlama” and “çöğer” in different regions.

For some âşıks, their proficiency in improvisational poetry and saz playing is attributed to a mystical encounter; they claim to have received a divine elixir in their dreams from a prophet, caliph, saint, or esteemed master âşık, viewing this bade (elixir) as a sacred talisman...
imbued with magical properties. They perceive this gift as a divine reward from Allah. The nature of this bade could vary, ranging from a simple glass of water to a piece of bread or a slice of orange, with the provider often embodying religious significance as a prophet, caliph, saint, or esteemed master aşık.

Others attribute their prowess to the traditional apprenticeship known as the master-apprentice relationship, within which they honed their craft. As apprentice aşık mature in their artistry and transition from apprenticeship to mastery under the guidance of a master aşık, they are bestowed with a pseudonym known as mahlas by their masters. This symbolic gesture marks their readiness to partake in performances independently. Additionally, some aşık claim to have consumed the mystical concoction and undergone apprenticeship alongside a master.

Master aşık may not overtly exhibit religious characteristics, akin to shamans. However, historically, aşık undertook roles reminiscent of shamans. Shamans were traditionally responsible for a diverse array of functions such as priesthood, divination, healing, and poetry. With the influence of religion, over time, the poetic functions of shamans were initially passed on to individuals called ozans (bards), who were later referred to as aşık. With the influence of Islam, the role of priesthood among shamans gradually faded away. However, the reverence associated with this priesthood persisted, permeating each of the other functions undertaken by shamans.

Due to several aşık being illiterate, some of their poems were transcribed by others. Notably, some aşık managed to transcribe their own compositions. Despite the passage of time, poems that remained untranscribed have not been forgotten, as they continue to be sung by young aşık. This tradition, sustained by the younger generation, is referred to in literary circles as the “reciting of the poems and folk songs of masters”. Köroğlu holds a revered status among Turkish aşık, being regarded as the greatest master aşık. In addition to reciting the works of their own mentors, aşık unfailingly include Köroğlu’s poems in their performances. Failure to do so, they fear, may result in disturbances from Köroğlu’s horse visiting their families. The practice of reciting the poems of long-deceased master aşık likely stems from a desire to honor and appease their spirits. The endeavor to recite the poems of their masters, including Köroğlu, with the aim of elevating and appeasing the souls of deceased master aşık can be perceived as a form of communication with the departed, akin to shamans invoking the spirits of deceased ancestors to aid them during rituals. Young aşık believe they are fulfilling a debt of gratitude to their master aşık through this practice. However, the dynamics at play might not be as straightforward as they seem. Perhaps young aşık fear that if they do not recite their masters’ poems, they will anger their master aşık who granted them the title of master aşık, or in a sense, the permission to recite poetry. Moreover, young aşık fear that master aşık will take away this permission. Young aşık who recite the poems of deceased master aşık, including Köroğlu, may indeed be addressing their souls, much like shamans calling upon the spirits of deceased ancestors to help them during rituals, and inviting the souls of deceased master aşık into the environment they are in.

Shamans are known to be able to communicate with the dead and spirits. It is also accepted that aşık are similar to shamans in some of their characteristics (Başgöz 1967; Köprülü 1980, 1999; Günay 1992; Aslan 2009). In this context, the question remains as to whether aşık believe they possess the ability to communicate with the deceased, similar to shamans. This study aims to explain these questions. Accordingly, a sample group of 34 contemporary aşık was randomly selected. A semi-structured interview form, developed by the researchers, was administered to this group. The document analysis method was utilized to analyze the data gathered through these interviews. The objective was to elucidate the perspective of the contemporary aşık on this subject matter through the data gathered in the study. Outlining the fundamental concepts underpinning this tradition is imperative to ensure a thorough analysis of the interview data. Subsequently, these concepts will be interpreted within the context of the aşık tradition.
2. The Separation of the Soul from the Body: Death and the Afterlife

The concept of the soul or spirit arises from humans’ awareness of mortality, a distinguishing trait separating them from other earthly creatures. Contemplations on the afterlife have led to the development of various ideas, among which is the notion of the soul. The unsightliness of the decaying body after death has prompted the conceptualization of the soul (Ühri 2010, pp. 21–23). In societies with animistic ontologies, they have attributed souls to other living beings and even inanimate objects in their surroundings (Hançerlioğlu 1978, p. 347). According to animism, every entity, whether living or inanimate, possesses an inner essence that can be likened to a soul (Ühri 2010, p. 37).

The concept of the soul is associated with words meaning breath, wind, or gas in several languages (Ühri 2010, p. 43). According to Turkish mythology, the wind embodies a nonhuman entity symbolizing the formidable force of nature. Elucidating the bond between the shaman and the wind in Altai shamanism ceremonies, Potapov described the shaman’s rapid spinning with a drum in hand as a representation of the wind. This motion is interpreted as the shaman metaphorically “blowing” like the wind (Potapov 2012, p. 117). Additionally, the Shamanist Turks’ use of the term “tın”, which translates to breeze/wind/breath, to denote the concepts of soul and spirit, serves as a significant foundation for this notion (İnan 1986, p. 176). In present-day Turkish-Anatolian culture, the soul is perceived as ephemeral and believed to depart the body upon death. Regarded as the essence sustaining both life and death, the soul is frequently equated with the concept of vitality. While residing within the body during life, the soul symbolizes the individual’s existence beyond death (Örnek 1971, p. 61).

The concept of death, defined as “the termination of vital functions in living beings in a way that will not be repeated”, is often regarded from a religious standpoint as “the separation of the soul from the body” (Hançerlioğlu 1978, p. 23). Within this context, Pacific and Australian natives may have perceived the act of dying as a journey to an afterlife that extends far beyond the biological realm (Kellehear 2012, p. 54). Life after death is defined as living as a dead person. People used to envision life after death as existing in a corporeal manner, with the dead continuing to live in a physical form in ancient Egypt. However, with the introduction of the concept of the soul, the deceased came to be viewed as disembodied entities. This belief contributed to the tradition of mumification (Hançerlioğlu 1978, p. 25). In monotheistic religions, the afterlife is often conceptualized as being distinctly different from the earthly realm. Conversely, in polytheistic, shamanic, and pagan religions, the afterlife is often perceived as analogous to the world we inhabit (Ühri 2010, p. 25). In this context, proto-Turks believed that graves constructed underground in the form of houses, known as kurgans, and the objects buried alongside the deceased reflect the belief that the departed will continue their existence in a parallel world resembling our own (Çoruhlu 2004, p. 250). In Islam, burial practices diverge significantly from other belief systems. Deceased individuals are wrapped in a simple cloth known as a shroud and buried without any additional items. This is because their new life is believed to unfold in
places referred to as paradise, hell, or purgatory, which are incomparable to anything in this world.

Although the traces of shamanic rituals (invoking the spirits of departed ancestors, embarking on celestial and subterranean journeys empowered by them) regarding the deceased and the living may not necessarily be rooted in a religious context, they persist in contemporary popular beliefs\(^4\) (such as preaching at funerals), warranting consideration within this framework in present-day Turkiye\(^5\). Although not widespread, examples can be found in various regions of Turkiye where the belongings of the deceased or various worldly items (such as money, leaves, etc.) are placed in the graves, mouths, or hands of the deceased. In present-day Turkiye, the washing or destruction of personal belongings of the deceased, particularly clothing, is notable as an expression of fear and loyalty (Örnek 1971, pp. 72–73, 105–6).

3. The Reflections of Shamanism in the Pre-Islamic Turkish Belief System

During the period when Turks lived in small social units, their religious beliefs were rooted in totemism. Fuad Köprülü defined totemism as “the religion of the ‘Semiyye Clan,’ which represents the smallest, very small single part of the tribe”. These social units derived their names from plants or animals that they consider to be their ancestors\(^6\) based on the fundamental principle of totemism. Moreover, these plants or animals were also revered as objects of worship. Traditional ceremonies such as sı˘gır (cattle sacrifices), şölen (feasts), and yu˘ğ (funerals) are believed to have persisted from these periods. Köprülü further noted that beliefs in yir-sub/yer-su (land–water) spirits were integrated into the religious practices of the Turks during the Tu-kiee period. He asserted that shamanism, which is still observed among present-day Altai Turks, was the predominant religion during this era (Köprülü 1980, pp. 14–15).

Abdulkadir İnan asserted that among the Turks, individuals who conduct the rituals and ceremonies of shamanism and serve as intermediaries between spirits and humans are referred to as “kam”. According to Kâşgarlı Mahmud, “kam” was synonymous with the term “kahin” (soothsayer)\(^7\). The term “shaman”, which is commonly used today, originates from the Tungus language, and it became prevalent in literature from the 18th century onwards. This term is linked to the Pali word “samna” and shares the same root as the Sanskrit word “çramana”, meaning priest/ascetic. Kams were individuals who mediate between gods and spirits, pray to them, deliver the sacrifices offered to appease them and receive the necessary knowledge and power to do this from the heavens and ancestral spirits. To become a kam, one must be a descendant of a kam. However, afterwards, one must undergo training to learn all aspects of shamanism under the guidance of an elder and experienced kam. Kam candidates have expressed that the spirits of their ancestors have possessed them. In other words, they were chosen individuals. The fate of those who did not respond to the shamanic call of their ancestral spirits was to lose their minds and go insane. In fact, these chosen shaman candidates were generally noticed to be more irritable and melancholic types compared with other people under normal circumstances. Young shams who completed their training under the guidance of a master shaman would go a transitional ceremony known as a “kam bakşı toy”, which is attended by their relatives (İnan 1986, pp. 72–90). In his discussion on the nature of shamans, İnan emphasized that they believe they are chosen by the gods, that spirits serve them, and that they possess imaginative, mystical, and intelligent traits (İnan 1976, pp. 54–58). İbrahim Kafesoğlu referred to the shamans’ understanding of the secrets of the celestial realm and the underworld with the assistance of deceased shaman spirits, noting that these ancestral spirits manifest to the shaman candidate during dreams, illnesses, or ecstatic states (Kafesoğlu 1980, pp. 22–67). According to the belief, only shamans have the ability to perceive spirits (Stutley 2023, p. 131). Harun Güngör suggested that the primary task of shamans is to communicate with spirits and guide them in favor of humans. Fainting, seizures, and asthma attacks are interpreted as signs of shamanism (Güngör 2012, pp. 55–59)\(^8\). Mircea Eliade emphasized that it is erroneous to use terms...
such as shaman, medicine-man, sorcerer, or magician as if they mean the same thing when referring to religiously respected figures in different societies around the world. He outlines in general terms that “the shaman is in fact a magician and an herbalist; like all physicians, he is believed to cure diseases; like all magicians, primitive and modern, he is believed to perform ‘poor’ miracles. But he is also a psychopompere; he can also be a priest, a mystic and a bard”. He also said that magical/religious life revolves around shamans. At this point, he noted that despite all this, shamans are not the only clergymen; priests, as sacrificial offerers, also function as clergymen in society. He emphasized that shamans are still the most important figures in the religious sense, and that this is due to their competent ecstasy (extase) abilities. That was because in shamanist communities, ecstasy is the most important religious experience and ability. Shamans were also considered to be the chief masters of ecstasy. Following these determinations, Eliade’s final definition of the term shaman is as follows: shamanism = the technique of ecstasy. According to Eliade, the most important feature that distinguishes shamans from their counterparts was their unique ecstasy technique. Through ecstasy, shamans could ascend to the sky, in a sense to the level of God. Eliade asked the following important rhetorical question in his work: “In other words, could it not be that the desire to realize both a mystical and a real journey to the Sky at any cost and by any means at all could have led to the perverse states of ecstasy that we encounter? . . . And finally, could not these behaviors be the inevitable result of a desire to ‘live’ that has turned into a passion, that is, a desire to ‘experience’ on a sensual level something that in our human condition is only accessible on a ‘spiritual’ level? . . .” (Eliade [1951] 1999, pp. 21–23, 536–37).

Christine S. VanPool explored the continuity of the connection between shaman and priest in her article, “The signs of the sacred: Identifying shamans using archaeological evidence”. While explaining the mechanism of shamanism, Vanpool distinguishes between ASC (altered states of consciousness) and SSC (Shamanic states of consciousness). Accordingly, when entering a world full of spirits and creatures, the shaman first reaches the ASC through drumming, chanting, hunger, thirst, extreme pain, loss of blood, insomnia, or psychotropic plants. Shamans are aware of the physical world in a different way than other people experiencing ASC. With this awareness, shamans reach the spiritual world, where they are able to die and integrate with their guardian creatures, and in the SSC, they are also able to transform into anthropomorphic creatures (VanPool 2009, pp. 180–82). In SSC, shamans almost always speak with the spirits of their ancestors who guide the continuation of their lineage (Steadman and Palmer 1994 as cited in VanPool 2009, p. 182).

It is precisely at this point that the incident of drinking bade, where âşıks then gain the ability to sing improvised poetry, comes to mind. Bade, which is a magical drink or food, is usually offered to the âşıks in a state of fainting/eczasy/trance or sleep. These states evoke a shamanic state of consciousness. When the âşık who drank the bade in one of the states listed above wakes up, he suddenly picks up a saz and starts singing improvised poetry/folk songs. The fact that those who offer the bade are religious elders such as prophets, caliphs, and saints does not escape attention at this point. Although the âşık may not be able to reach the sky, i.e., God, by passing out, he comes face to face with the prophet, the messenger of God, the caliphs of the prophet, or religious elders such as the saints in a state of fainting/trance or sleep.

Among the Turks, the earliest folk poets, akin to modern-day âşıks, are said to have emerged in Attila’s army during the 5th century. These poets were known to participate in feasts organized by Attila and sing his praises. They also played a role in funeral ceremonies within Turkic society. Over time, these figures retained their significance in society under different names and roles. Synthesizing various scholars’ perspectives on the term ozan, Fuad Köprülü argued that among the Oghuz people, the word has long denoted folk poets and musicians. Following the 15th century, the term gave way to âşık in Anatolia and Azerbaijan and baksı9 in Turkmen regions (Köprülü 1999, pp. 131–64). Pertev Naili Boratav highlighted that the term âşık began to be employed as a title for artists who performed
various forms of folk poetry and folk tales starting from the early 16th century (Boratav 1968, p. 340).

According to Ensar Aslan, there are many similarities common to the training, development, and societal roles of shamans, as well as the process of becoming and receiving the title of aşık (folk poets). Especially noteworthy in this context is that both of these draw their strength from divine aspects or spiritual powers (Aslan 2009, pp. 17–18).

Umay Günay explained that today’s folk poets are a version of the pre-Islamic tradition of poets and bards (ozan/bâkşı) influenced by Sufi structures, but adapted to Islamic principles (Günay 1992, pp. 8–19). İlhan Bağgöz noted that the rituals and beliefs identified during the shamanistic period among the Turks continued through the Islamic period in folk tales based on the motif of dreams. According to Günay, there are striking similarities between the acceptance into the profession of a shaman candidate and an aşık candidate and the dream motif. The act of aşıks drinking bade in their dreams while in a state of fainting/trance or sleep is related to the prominent dreams, illnesses, or ecstatic states during the shamanic initiation process. Bağgöz presented examples of these similarities through texts of the Islamic period Turkish literature, often referring to Eliade (Bağgöz 1967, pp. 1–18). Similarly, the ritual of dying and being resurrected seen in shamanism is softened and seen in the process of becoming an aşık (Aça 2002, p. 76). The emergence of the aşık from a profound slumber, often induced by a spiritual entity (such as the Prophet Muhammad, Hz. Ali, Hz. Khidr, or spiritual guides), typically facilitated by the consumption of a beverage, echoes the ritualistic themes of death and rebirth. The characterization of sleep as the “little death” in Turkish culture (Ergin 2004, p. 234) and Qur’an (Surah Al-Zumar, verse 42) sheds light on this phenomenon.

4. Religion, Government, and Aşıks

The aşıks established close relations with the state during the Ottoman period. It is known that the Janissaries (a type of military unit in the Ottoman army), the most important element of the Ottoman army, had a mystical attachment to the famous mystic Hacı Bektaş Veli. This relationship led to the emergence of a group known as soldier poets (aşıks) within the Ottoman army. It should not be forgotten that individuals such as Pir Sultan Abdal and Dadaloğlu also wrote poems in opposition to the authority of the state. However, these dissidents are few in number. In today’s Türkiye, dervish lodges and zawiyas (or small dervish lodges) possess the status of museums. The state even organizes official ceremonies at the Hacı Bektaş Veli and Mevlana lodges.

It would be correct to analyze the history of Turkish democracy under two main headings, namely the single-party democracy and multi-party democracy. Turkish democracy has also faced many violent military coups. Despite these drastic changes and interventions in the political platform, aşıks have continued their art during almost every period. The way to ensure this was to avoid clashes with the state authority.

The proclamation of the Republic led to some changes in social life in Turkiye. One of these was the closure of the dervish lodges and zawiyas on 30 November 1925. The dervish lodges and zawiyas are religious institutions where some of aşıks even receive education and guidance. The new regime took its own measures by closing down these structures that had often interfered in politics in the past. The People’s Party (later known as the Republican People’s Party/Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi/CHP), founded by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, was the sole power in parliament between 1923 and 1946. In Turkish political history, this period is referred to as the single party era. It is known that poets in this period sang poems praising the new regime—Atatürk and Atatürk’s revolutions.
first election in which more than one party participated was held in 1946. In this election, the CHP won 397 seats, the DP (Democratic Party) 61 seats and independents 7 seats. In the elections held in 1950, the Democrat Party won 416 of the 487 parliamentary seats and came to power with a large majority. In this context, it is worth remembering that the CHP represented the left-wing ideology while the DP represented the right-wing ideology. In the multi-party democratic process in Türkiye, while left-wing parties rarely won elections, right-wing parties came out ahead in the number of seats in parliament. For this reason, even though the dervish lodges and zawiyas were closed in principle, they were not seen as a threat by the state authority except during the military coup periods. This is because right-wing parties in Türkiye, as in the rest of the world, have relationships with religious structures, although the degree of closeness varies. Left-wing parties in Türkiye can also be seen to display a closeness with the Bektashi lodges and the ceremonies organized in these lodges through the Hacı Bektaş Veli cult. Bektashism stands out as one of the elements that nourish the rituals of Alevis in Turkey. The political tendencies of Alevi have also been predominantly in favor of left-wing parties. In other words, even though the right- and left-wing parties in Türkiye have different perspectives, they have not taken positions which are radically against lodges and zawiyas which are one of the environments where aşık is cultivated. In this way, aşık have managed to survive until today.

5. Reciting the Works of Masters or Köroğlu as the Symbolism of Summoning Spirits

Contemporary aşık’s dedication to upholding traditions like drinking bade in dreams, maintaining the master–apprentice relationship, and adopting mahlas (pseudonyms) is notable. Within the aşık community, being recognized as a badeli aşık is regarded as a prestigious privilege. While the master–apprentice dynamic has been affected by migrations spurred by industrialization, it endures among the aşık through various methods. Apprenticeship may involve physically apprenticing under a master, spending time with them, or even spiritually acknowledging someone as a master, regardless of whether they have met in person. In the latter scenario, even aşık who passed away many years ago can be revered as spiritual mentors. The concept of these pseudonyms often serves as the key to the apprentice aşık’s transition into the esteemed guild of master aşık during the master–apprentice relationship.

The aşık nurtured within the master–apprentice relationship uphold the legacies of their masters through performances known as usta mali (the works of masters) in the gatherings they partake in, both during their mentors’ lifetimes and after their passing. The historical origins of the performances of the works of masters likely trace back to the ancestral cult beliefs deeply ingrained in Turkish shamanism. In early Central Asian shamanism, the reverence toward ancestors (cedd-i âlâ) holds particular significance amidst the veneration of deities like the Sky God, sun, moon, earth, water, and fire (hearth) (Inan 1986, p. 2). According to Altai customs, shamanism advocates for the unwavering devotion and obedience to Tengri (God) and spiritual entities (Potapov 2012, p. 13). The practice of ancestor veneration emerged from beliefs steeped in reverence and apprehension toward deceased family members. Over time, the early Turkic societies developed a ritualistic reverence, fueled by fear of the soul’s enduring presence after death. Central to this apprehension was the belief that the spirits of deceased ancestors could manifest regardless of temporal or spatial boundaries, potentially causing harm to the living descendants.

Bayram Durbilmez delineated the journey of becoming an aşık into four stages, “initiation into the art of aşık, apprenticeship, journeyman phase, and mastery”. He noted that the apprenticeship period marks the commencement of learning the works of masters, with their actual performance commencing during the journeyman phase (Durbilmez 2008, pp. 73–78). In present-day Anatolian folklore folk tales, the segment referred to as “döşeme” is known as “ustadname” (döşeme/ustadname is the section where the works of the master aşık are recited) in the Azerbaijani region. Here, a minimum of three couplets from the master aşık’s poems are recited. These poems may belong to a single aşık or various aşık (Alptekin 2002, p. 43). During the hatırlatma–canlandırma (remembrance–revival) segment
of the âşık fasilts, the âşıkks recite poems which are the works of their masters to honor them, a tradition integral to the culture. An âşık may perform the works of their own master or another master during this period, simultaneously seeking divine mercy for the master âşık (Kaya 2007, p. 84). This practice of reciting the works of masters is also colloquially referred to as bringing the works of masters to the fore (Yardımcı 2002, p. 210).

Turkish literature recognizes two distinct Köroğlus, with one as the protagonist of stories and epic sagas and the other as a saz poet (Sakaoğlu 2013, p. 127). While opinions vary on whether they are the same individual, (Alptekin 2002, p. 120) this remains a subject for further research. Âşıkks regard Köroğlu as their spiritual guide, often commencing their performances with a Köroğlu song. Additionally, there exists a folk melody named after Köroğlu, along with a folk dance bearing his name. Moreover, one of the poets of the time called out to his son from his deathbed, saying, “Son, recite me a Köroğlu poem before I die”, as he was pulling the blanket over himself. In light of these observations, Cahit Öztil reflected, “It is apparent that Köroğlu remains intertwined with the lives of the people, whether in moments of joy, during life, or in death”. This enduring connection signifies that Köroğlu is not merely perceived as a fictional character but rather as a historical figure, the memory of whom is cherished at every juncture of life, akin to a living legacy (Öztelli 1962, p. 7). Notably, contemporary âşıkks, recognizing Köroğlu as their spiritual leader, ensure his presence is honored by singing poems dedicated to him during their âşık gatherings, as documented by Pertev Naili Boratav and Saim Sakaoğlu. This belief stems from the notion that Köroğlu imposed a curse on âşıkks who neglected to sing poems about him. Âşıkks hold the conviction that by honoring Köroğlu through song, they appease his spirit and avert his potential displeasure (Boratav 2002, p. 32; Sakaoğlu 2012, p. 16). According to folklore among the âşıkks from Erzurum and Kars, Köroğlu purportedly declared, “If âşıkks conclude their performance without paying homage to me, then my horse will neigh at their mother-in-law’s door”. (Özarslan 2001, p. 236). Fahrettin Kırzıoğlu suggested a similar sentiment expressed by Köroğlu, “Swearing an oath against the folk poets/bards playing and singing at weddings and festivities, he said, “May the right leg of my Kırat horse go up the . . . of his mother-in-law, if he does not repeat three of my sayings” (Kırzıoğlu 1968, pp. 479–80). A diverse array of poems is recited, encompassing various genres such as divan, tecnis (play on words), rhymes, koşma (a type of verse), epic sagas, semaî (another type of verse), Köroğlu, riddle, and works of masters’ poems in the fasil section of folk tales. Among these, the recitation of Köroğlu poems and songs holds particular significance as it is deemed obligatory (Kaya 2007, p. 318). Notably, one of the bars in Erzurum bears the name “Köroğlu”, and its music features one of the melodies associated with Köroğlu and sung by âşıkks (Özarslan 2001, p. 99). Furthermore, one of the Alevi semahs is known as the Kırat Semah, further illustrating Köroğlu’s enduring influence across various cultural expressions (Bayat 2009, p. 47).

6. The Perception of Köroğlu among Contemporary Âşıkks

The information provided thus far suggests a resemblance between the beliefs and rituals linked with shamanism, referred to as “kamlık”, and the tradition upheld by modern âşıkks. The ceremonial consumption of bade reminds us of the shaman apprentice passing out and waking up foaming at the mouth. The relationship between master shamans and their apprentices is similar to the master–apprentice relationship seen in the training of âşıkks. The recitation of the poems and folk songs of Köroğlu and other master âşıkks by other âşıkks is similar to the way shamans call upon the spirits of their deceased ancestors during the ritual. This study was conducted by analyzing data derived from semi-structured interviews executed with a sample group comprising 34 âşıkks, chosen through a simple random sampling technique.

Of these 34 âşıkks, 1 (2.9%) was in the age range of 20–29, 1 (2.9%) was in the age range of 30–39, 2 (5.9%) were in the age range of 40–49, 3 (8.8%) were in the age range of 50–59, 20 (58.8%) were in the age range of 60–69, and 7 (20.6%) were in the age range of 70–79 (see Figure 1). Being an âşık is a process that starts at a young age. When the distribution of
the āşiks in the sample, grouped according to age groups, is analyzed, it is seen that the majority are between the ages of 50–79. Just like shamans, āşiks need to reach a degree of maturity in terms of their age in order to reach the level of master (see Figure 1).

![Figure 1. Average ages of āşiks.](image)

Among the āşiks, 3 (8.8%) were from the Mediterranean region, 22 (64.7%) were from Eastern Anatolia, 2 (5.9%) were from the Aegean, 3 (8.8%) were from Central Anatolia, and 4 (11.8%) were from cities in the Black Sea region (see Figure 2). Eastern Anatolia is the region where the “āşık” tradition is most intensely practiced. When Graphic 2 is analyzed, this reality is also seen in the sample group. Köroğlu’s curse directed at āşiks who did not recite his poems was also identified in Eastern Anatolia by researchers such as Pertev Naili Boratav and Ensar Aslan between 1940 and 1970.

![Figure 2. Regions where āşiks born.](image)

All 34 āşiks interviewed (100%) affirmed that they were brought up within the tradition of apprenticeship. Among them, 22 individuals (64.7%) underwent direct apprenticeship under a master, while the remaining 12 (35.3%) did not have formal apprenticeships but were instead influenced by one or more āşiks whom they regarded as spiritual guides (see Figure 3). This result is very striking, because feeling connected to a master in any way whatsoever will result in remembering him after his death. This necessity is the antecedent of the conclusions to be conveyed in the lines that follow.

All 34 āşiks interviewed affirmed that they performed the works of masters at the events they attended (100%). Additionally, all the āşiks mentioned that the primary reason for reciting the works of masters was to honor and perpetuate the memories of their masters, which they considered a demonstration of loyalty. Commemorating and honoring
the soul of an ordinary dead person is performed through prayers. That is because it is believed that the soul is aware of the prayer. According to Islamic belief, the dead are able to hear. It is recorded in the Holy Qur’an and important hadith and fiqh books that the Prophets Abraham, Jesus, and Muhammad spoke to the dead.\textsuperscript{18} The advice of the Prophet Muhammad to greet the deceased lying in graveyards upon entering them is noteworthy at this point. In this context, during “preaching”, which is the final stage of the ceremony and takes place after the burial, at Muslim funerals, the Imam calls out to the newly buried deceased, adding the names of the deceased’s parents to the name of the deceased (sometimes, only one of them), and reminds the deceased of the questions that will be asked and answered by the angels of interrogation called Munkar and Nekir, and the responses to these questions.

The \textit{aşiks}, who are associated with shamans due to some of the characteristics mentioned earlier, are not seen as ordinary people by society. Just like shamans, \textit{aşiks} also have extraordinary powers. One of the most important of these, which is gained as a result of drinking the \textit{bade} offered by the divine powers, is their ability to recite improvised poetry. Therefore, \textit{aşiks} are already in communication with God. They have even received a gift from God. This gift is of course, \textit{bade}, that is the ability to recite improvised poetry. In a sense, the ability to improvise was given to the \textit{aşiks} by God. From this point of view, those who can communicate with God will also be able to communicate with spirits. \textit{aşiks} believe that reciting masterful poetry is a way of honoring and glorifying the spirits of master \textit{aşiks}. Glorification is realized through prayer. Since displays by \textit{aşiks} are not religious programs, prayer is replaced by the works of masters due to the performance environment. Considering the belief that the ability to recite poetry is given by God, the works of \textit{aşiks} can also be considered to be sanctified. Again, as mentioned before, the living \textit{aşiks}, who call out to their masters by performing the works of the dead master \textit{aşiks}, call the spirits of the dead master \textit{aşiks} to the performance area, just as shamans call the spirits of dead shamans to their rituals. In this way, the spiritual power of the master \textit{aşık} will be with them. In this process, the works of masters also serve as the vocalization of a call. It should be noted that shamans, \textit{aşiks} and imams who can communicate with the spirits/dead undergo a formal or informal training processes. Shamans and \textit{aşiks} complete their education in a master-apprentice relationship, while imams complete their education in the relevant schools. Communication with the spirits/dead takes place in special settings such as shaman rituals, displays by \textit{aşiks}, or funeral ceremonies. Again, when the selection process of the shamans and the process of drinking \textit{bade} (extaz state) of the \textit{aşiks} are taken into account, it leads to the belief that their talents are given by God and therefore, what they say is necessarily inspired by God or related to God. Imams, on the other hand, speak the direct word of God; that is, prayers.
The image below (see Figure 4), in which we evaluate the relationship between shamans and today’s aşıkş, and imams, summarizes what we have explained so far:

![Diagram showing the relationship between shamans (A) and today's aşıkş (B), and imams (C).](image)

**Figure 4.** The relationship between shamans (A) and today’s aşıkş (B), and imams (C).

Out of the 34 aşıkş interviewed, 33 (97.1%) stated that they recited the poems and folk songs of Köroğlu at the events they attended, while 1 (2.9%) mentioned that they did not (see Figure 5).

![Pie chart showing the percentage of aşıkş who recite poems and folk songs of Köroğlu.](image)

**Figure 5.** Aşıkş according to recite Köroğlu’s poems and folk songs.

Of the 33 aşıkş who recited Köroğlu’s works, 1 (3%) stated that the reason for doing so was that Köroğlu was considered the master of aşıkş, 1 (3%) mentioned that this was due to the desire to commemorate Köroğlu, 1 (3%) stated that this was because Köroğlu was famous for his storytelling skills, and 30 (91%) stated that it was because the event should end with a performance of koçaklama (heroic epic saga) songs (see Figure 6). Aşıkş who stated that the needed to end in this way specifically emphasized that Köroğlu came to mind when talking about koçaklama.

Among these 30 aşıkş, 7 (23.3%) mentioned that they learned the phrase “Sazın başı nere, sonu nere?” (“Where is the beginning and where is the end of the instrument?”) in response to their masters as, “The beginning is the divan and the end is Köroğlu.”
One important finding from the study is that of the 33 âşık who stated that they recited Köroğlu’s poems and folk songs at the events they attended, 6 of them (18.2%) were aware of the statement, “Whoever does not recite my poems and folk songs, let my horse neigh at their mother-in-law’s door until morning”, which carries a curse-like nature.

One âşık (2.9%) who mentioned not singing Köroğlu’s works at the events they attended was brought up under the tradition of the master–apprentice relationship, directly influenced by a master. This âşık hailed from the Central Anatolia region and fell into the age group of 20–29. Of the 34 âşıks interviewed, only 1 (2.9%) abstained from reciting Köroğlu’s works, representing an important finding in the study. The fact that this âşık was the youngest among those interviewed suggests that their reluctance to recite Köroğlu’s works might stem from a lack of experience rather than a deliberate choice. These data imply a potential risk of the tradition of reciting Köroğlu’s works fading away. Drawing such an inference might not be entirely reliable, especially considering that the same âşık mentioned their involvement in reciting the works of masters. Moreover, this âşık represented just 1 out of the 34 âşıks interviewed, suggesting that their perspective may not be indicative of the broader trend among âşıks.

7. Conclusions

Âşıks, renowned for their mastery of music and poetry, have historical roots intertwined with shamanism (kam) and persist within the framework of folklore in contemporary times. Their upbringing within the framework of master–apprentice relationships and the performance of the works of masters influenced by this tradition serve as the focal points of this study. Beliefs and practices such as imbibing bade in dreams, the sacred bond of master–apprentice relationships, and the exchange of mahtas (pseudonyms), deeply embedded in early Turkish âşık tradition, continue to be upheld by modern-day âşıks. The act of âşıks drinking bade in their dreams while in a state of fainting/trance or sleep is related to the belief in ancestral spirits in shamanism, as well as to the prominent dreams, illnesses, or ecstatic states during the shamanic initiation process. Additionally, the practice of taking/giving pseudonyms and performing the works of masters within the tradition of master–apprentice relationships among âşıks is also associated with the belief in ancestral spirits in shamanism. The journey from apprenticeship to mastery observed in both shamans and âşıks further underscores these similarities. Moreover, the analogous notions of sleep and death, as well as the belief in summoning and communicating with spirits, serve as noteworthy points of convergence between these traditions.

The ancestral cult, a cornerstone of shamanism, entails the reverence of departed ancestors’ spirits, notably those of deceased shamans. During rituals, shamans frequently invoke the spirits of their predecessors, beseeching their guidance for traversing the celestial
realms or confronting malevolent forces lurking in the underworld. The act of offering bade within the âşık tradition, often performed by revered religious figures like prophets, caliphs, or saints, resonates with the idea of shamans being selected. This parallels the belief that âşiks, akin to shamans, are chosen and sanctified by their religious community, echoing the spirit of departed shaman ancestors. The act of presenting bade, often in a state of trance or unconsciousness, parallels the experiences of shamans in a state of trance, illness, or ecstasy. Similarly, the recitation of divine-like poems resembling prayers by shamans during rituals to summon the spirits of deceased ancestors finds a striking similarity with the participation of âşiks in programs where they perform the works of masters. In a study conducted in Türkiye in 2024, all 34 âşiks interviewed (100%) affirmed their upbringing within the tradition of master-apprentice relationships and their practice of performing the works of masters in the programs they participated in. All of the âşiks (100%) emphasized that the reason for reciting the works of masters was to “preserve the memories of those masters”. Their statements, such as “We will preserve the memories of the masters so that those who come after us will also preserve our memories”, highlight the deep commitment to upholding their tradition and passing it down to future generations.

In the âşık tradition, the assignment of a pseudonym, which serves as the special name used in the âşık’s poems, is typically bestowed by their own master or another renowned âşık. To have a pseudonym is, in a sense, an indication of completing the stages of apprenticeship and journeyman in the âşık tradition and reaching the level of mastery; in other words, a sign of maturity. When a master âşık grants a pseudonym to an âşık, it also implies the giving of permission for the âşık to perform independently in programs. Consequently, if deemed necessary, the master also held the authority to revoke this permission from the âşık. This dynamic likely contributed to a respect driven by fear, aimed at safeguarding against potential repercussions from deceased ancestors, a fundamental aspect of the ancestor cult. Furthermore, the information and data acquired through literature review, as presented in the study, underscore the intimate connection between the contemporary âşiks’ tradition of reciting the works of masters and the deeply ingrained belief in ancestral spirits prevalent in shamanism. In this context, it is crucial to highlight the rule of singing about Koroğlu, which is deemed an essential component of the Turkish âşık tradition. Particularly in the compilation-based studies conducted between 1940 and 1970, the âşiks of that era regarded Koroğlu as their mentor and believed in his curse, “If you do not sing about me in the gatherings after me, may my Kırat horse neigh at your mother-in-law’s door until morning”. This belief sheds light on the significance of incorporating Koroğlu’s works into the performances of âşiks. During the study, of the 34 âşiks interviewed, 33 (97.1%) answered “yes” to the question “Do you sing Koroğlu’s songs in the programs you participate in?”

The fact that 1 âşık among the 34 âşiks interviewed answered “no” to the question (2.9%) was also mentioned in the section where data analysis was conducted, indicating that this âşık was likely the youngest among them (in the 20–29 age range). This situation could be explained by the possibility that the âşık has not yet gained enough experience in singing Koroğlu songs. These âşiks are still at the beginning of their journey, and it is highly likely that they will eventually sing Koroğlu songs in the future as they gain more experience and expertise in their craft. Among the âşiks who affirmed singing Koroğlu’s songs in the programs they participated in, 90.9% indicated that they did so due to the obligation to perform Koçaklama (epic folk poems) in gatherings, emphasizing the association of Koroğlu with this traditional form of performance. Âşiks attribute reciting the works of masters to the concept of loyalty, while they view singing about Koroğlu as an obligation. It seems that the curse attributed to Koroğlu, “If you don’t sing something about me in gatherings after my passing, may my horse neigh at your mother-in-law’s door until morning”, has created a similar effect to the fear of ancestral spirits among Shamanist Turks. During the study, among the 33 âşiks who confirmed singing Koroğlu’s songs in the programs they participated in, 6 âşiks (18.2%) were aware of Koroğlu’s curse-like prayer. These findings carry significant weight given the historical context associated with the emergence of this curse. Contemporary âşiks, motivated by a reverence akin to the shamans
who invoke the spirits of deceased shaman masters through divine-like prayers, invoke the spiritual essence of the master aşık by performing the works of masters or folk songs that specifically reference the name of the master aşık, in line with the tradition of mahlas (the pseudonym). The objective is to harness the spiritual potency of the master aşık, akin to the shamans’ practice of invoking the spirits of departed master shamans during their rituals. The formal and functional resemblances between the invocations of shamans and the verses and melodies performed by aşıks are also striking. Examining these divine compositions within the realm of religious literature sheds light on their significance and relevance to the topic.

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**Notes**

1. Traditional Turkish folk poet.
2. This example is important for the function of wind in rituals. “Yel” and the vocabulary related to “yel” predominates in the texts associated with the shaman and their rituals. For instance, in Divânî Lugat’t-ı Türk, “yelvi” is documented with the meaning of “magic” or “magician” (Ercilasun and Akkoyunlu 2014, p. 362). Potapov suggests that the term “yelbi–yelvi–yelvi” signifies the power of the shaman and the potency of the spirits they invoke (Potapov 2012, p. 162). It is notable that various interpretations can be gleaned from the context of “breeze and wind” in historical Turkish language texts, particularly concerning how shamans utilize the breeze and wind during their rituals. The breeze generated by the shaman during the ritual, symbolized through drumming, belts, fabric, and similar elements, is described as evoking a breeze or wind. It is elucidated that the spirits invoked by the shaman when casting spells also accompany this breeze (Potapov 2012, p. 117). The breeze produced by the shaman during rituals, coupled with Islamic beliefs, lays the groundwork for designations related to “yel” created by sorcerers through “blowing”. In TIEM 73, one of the earliest Islamic texts, the term “üf tuf kılığı kışı” is used to refer to the sorcerer. The term “üf tuf” refers to sorcerers who practice magic through blowing. The contemporary usage of the word “üfürükçü” (exorcist) for sorcerers can also be traced back to the same origin (Güzelderen 2020, pp. 419–20).
3. Jan Assmann highlighted the connection between the concepts of death, memory, and remembrance, linking the continuation of the deceased within the memories of the living to this subject (Assmann 2015, pp. 41–43).
4. The reason why it is not in a religious context is that Islam does not approve of these customs. For detailed information see Güzelderen (2020), pp. 102–3, 374–76).
5. According to records in Chinese annals, among the Turks, it was customary for all male or female relatives to sacrifice sheep and horses upon the death of a loved one, placing the sacrificial offerings in front of the deceased’s tent as a tribute (Eberhard 1996, p. 86; cited from Çu’çu and Liu-Mau-Tsai by Tryjarski 2012, pp. 161–62). The practice of offering sacrifices to the deceased is influenced by the belief that the souls of the sacrifices accompany the deceased on their journey to the afterlife (Tryjarski 2012, p. 162). Additionally, offering cloth during funeral ceremonies is an old tradition among the Shamanist Turks (Canpolat 1975, p. 29). This tradition is further documented in 11th-century texts such as Divânî Lugat’t-ı Türk. In Kashgarli Mahmud’s work, the term “örtüg” denotes silk fabric laid on the graves of elders, while “öşük” signifies fabric sent to honor lords and gentlemen, which is then distributed to the poor (Ercilasun and Akkoyunlu 2014, pp. 34, 51), serving as expressions of gift-giving. The custom of organizing a meal in the name of the deceased, known as “yoğ”, is also evident in 11th-century texts like Kutadgu Bilig, described as a gift presented after the death of the individual: “yoğ aşı bolur ya ölib atmə / ya ol at bulup aş birir yətərə” (KB 4577: Arat 2007, p. 459).
Köprülü also notes the presence of Manizm, a religion based on worshipping the spirit of the ancestor, during the Hiyong–Nular period (Köprülü 2005, p. 40).

Mustafa Canpolat suggests that while the equivalent of the word “kam” in Divânı Lugat’t Türk is given as “diviner, shaman”, the function of magic also comes to mind when examining the examples in the text (Canpolat 1975, p. 23). In early Islamic Turkish texts, the word “kam” was used not only to mean “diviner, shaman” but also “sorcerer, fortune-teller, healer”, and “one who has lost his mind” (Güzelderen and Karadavut 2023, p. 169).

Margaret Stutley, discussing the diversity of shamanism practices in different geographical locations and communities, noted three commonalities in all forms of shamanism: “(1) Belief in a spirit world, often in the form of animals, that can influence humans. The shaman must adeptly manage both benevolent and malevolent spirits or collaborate with them for the welfare of their community. (2) When entering the supernatural realm, the shaman achieves a state of trance through singing, dancing, and drumming. (3) Shamans also address certain ailments, typically psychosomatic, and assist clan members in navigating various challenges and adversities” (Stutley 2023, pp. 10–11).

Among the Uyghurs, the term bükşi/bahşi was utilized in texts from the Uyghur period in a spiritual and priestly context. In texts influenced by Buddhism, the word is equivalent to Buddhist monks. Köprülü reminds us that before the acceptance of Buddhism, the word kam was used among the Turks in various senses, including spiritual, magician, fortune-teller, healer, and surgeon. Presently, the term bükşi/bahşi is still used among some Turks to denote a folk poet who sings accompanied by a saz, while among others, it refers to a magician, sorcerer, or folk healer (Köprülü 1999, pp. 145–56).

It is known that the functions of Turkish shamans were adapted in various forms in other religions adopted by the Turks. In this regard, in the original translation of the story of the Buddhist Prince Kalyânañâkara and Pâpanâkara, with culture-specific additions and omissions, the hero Hodisattva plays the kopuz and sings songs like a poet and manages to gather people around him every night (69–72; Hamilton 2011, pp. 45–47). This striking similarity can be considered a continuation of the function of poetry in shamans.

The notion of death and rebirth embodies themes of renewal and, in some cases, the attainment of divinity. From a Sufi standpoint, it represents the journey toward becoming a perfected human being prior to death (Aça 2002, p. 82). In this light, burial customs such as the “hocker” style, which mimics the posture of a fetus in the womb, observed not only among Turks but also in other communities, serve as symbols of “rebirth”. Furthermore, the practice of mummification is interpreted as a manifestation of this belief (Çoruhlu 2004, p. 245).

For detailed examples see Temur (2018).

For detailed examples, see Boratav (1981); Sakaølu and Karadavut (1998).

Boratav highlighted the significance of master âšık, also known as badeli âšık, emphasizing their influence within the âšık community, often associated with the symbolic drink known as bade. Bade, a symbolic libation, is typically presented by a religious figure, such as a spiritual leader or saint, or by a beloved figure deemed appropriate by the religious community. Sometimes, bade may also refer to items of food like bread, beans, or apples. It is believed that consuming bade enhances one’s poetic abilities (Boratav 1968, pp. 341–42). In the Alevi–Bektaø tradition, attaining the status of a badeli âšık is regarded as a divine blessing. Within this tradition, mahlas (pseudonym) names are also conferred by the spiritual leader (postnişin) to whom the âšık is affiliated (Artun 2008, pp. 243, 299).

For detailed information, see Yeøildal (2018); Yildiz Altın (2021).

For detailed information, see Karadavut (2002).

Kırat is the name of Köroølu’s horse with extraordinary features.


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