Otherness' and the *Cümbüş* in Modern Turkey[1]

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What do we identify as the quality of otherness? In ethnographic work the term usually refers to the acknowledgment of a minority/majority relationship, where the majority is privileged as primary, although of course even the smallest group of 'others' must themselves have 'others' in order for the distinction to remain (de Beauvoir 1948; Said 1979). It is a categorization that may be imposed from the outside of a social group, or it may be self-perpetuated from within it, and in fact it's usually a mixture of the two. People use acknowledgment of 'otherness' strategically: as a tool for negotiation in the marketplace of expectations and rights, to give, refuse or petition privileges, to remember or subvert particular versions of history, to capitalize on popular attraction to the exotic, maintain traditional hierarchies, et cetera. And 'otherness', when it is demonstrated publicly, may be marked using modes of dress, special speech, traditional occupations and, of course, by particular musical expressions, including the choice of which musical instruments to play. The topic of my present research is a particular musical instrument, the *cümbüş*, and its function as a locus for representation of 'otherness' in the public imaginary of the Republic of Turkey, its country of origin. My hypothesis is that the *cümbüş*'s association with musicians from ethnic minority communities in the early Republican period caused it to be viewed in Turkey as an instrument marking ethnic 'otherness', an association that persists, though with a varying cast of characters playing the 'others', up through the present time.

First, I'll provide a little background on the instrument. The history of musical instruments in general offers us more a handful of scrawled notes than a set of finished genealogies. For most instruments we have only origin-myths and vague lines of descent rather than a clear picture of which culture created which instruments, much less the stories of who, within the generating society, was playing them, and for whom. Although skin-faced plucked lutes existed before it in Africa, North America, and in Central and Southeast Asia, the case of the *cümbüş* as a distinct category of chordophone is ostensibly a clearer picture: whatever inspired it, the *cümbüş* is a twelve-stringed fretless 'banjo' with a deep aluminum body and a variety of changeable necks, patented in Istanbul in 1930 by a man named Zeynel Abidin, who later took the surname Cümbüş, after the instrument (Cümbüş 1938; Gesthuisen 2002). Even the origin of its name is well known: *cümbüş* means 'revelry' or 'fun' in Turkish, probably from the Farsi *jombesh*, meaning 'revolution' or 'ca-

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talytic activity.' The story, recounted today by Cümbüş's great-grandsons, tells us that Zeynel Abidin, whose family had brought its firearms business first to Izmir, then to Istanbul from Skopje, Macedonia in late Ottoman times, was at a dinner party in January of 1930 attended by the Turkish Republic's 'founding father' Kemal Atatürk when conversation about the new republic's modernization and Turkification efforts came around to the subject of music (Gesthuisen 2002). Atatürk reportedly loved Ottoman classical music and at that time was looking for a way to modernize it rather than replace it wholesale with the western classical music that he felt also had to be promoted for the sake of modernization. He is supposed to have been enthused by the enterprising Zeynel Abidin's forward-thinking invention, an inexpensive instrument easy to transport and hard to break, capable of playing both eastern *alaturca* music and, with a quick change of removable necks, western *alafranga* music as well.

Zeynel Abidin set up a private concert for Atatürk ten days later, in which the inventor's son Cemal played *cümbüş*, and all parties agreed that it was a thoroughly modern, and 'thoroughly Turkish' instrument, affordable to the 'common man' due to its ability to be mass produced at low cost (Gesthuisen 2002; A. Cümbüş 2005). Atatürk is said to have been favorably impressed by the sound and possibilities of the instrument and he pronounced it *cümbüş*, 'fun,' which word Zeynel Abidin asked the president if he could use as the instrument's name. Atatürk thus 'named' the *cümbüş* and soon had the chief of his Presidential Music Committee write a letter certifying that it was suitable for use in government-sponsored orchestras of classical Turkish music (A. Cümbüş 2005; Üngör 1999). Zeynel Abidin received the patent for his invention later that year. With such auspicious beginnings he predicted it would soon be amongst the preeminent Turkish instruments used for music in both the Ottoman classical and other *alaturca* styles, as well as other, more western-oriented genres; at Zeynel Abidin's low, mass production prices, and endorsed by Atatürk no less, there should've been a *cümbüş* in every Turkish home in no time (Gesthuisen 2002; A. Cümbüş 2005).

As it turns out, however, the fortunes of 'Ottoman' and *alaturca* musics, and along with them those of the *cümbüş*, were to find a harder road ahead of them than predicted in this story. The Turkish classical music establishment rejected the *cümbüş* out of hand as cheap and undignified for the task, as well as for being timbrally inappropriate and excessively loud for their music (Üngör 1999). Finding themselves on the defensive side of a battle for legitimacy against the supposedly more modern and progressive Western classical (and other *alafranga*) musical styles, they seem to have been little enthused about integrating an instrument whose purpose included relegating their centuries-old and court-oriented art to a musical side-street of working class popular amateurism (A. Cümbüş 2005). It didn't help

matters that the word *cümbüş* itself was a term in use to describe a frivolously over-ornamented style of playing, out of fashion since the advent of a clear, sparsely ornamented style promoted by composer Mesut Cemil Bey, who, unfortunately for the *cümbüş*, was in these early years, working at Radio Istanbul and soon to be director of Radio Ankara, the main outlets for broadcasting classical performances (Aksoy 1995). And yet despite this rejection, the *cümbüş* survives to tell its tale. So who was playing the *cümbüş* in early Republican times, and how did their playing it influence which groups play it today?

The *cümbüş* seems to have found its first home in the urban *meyhane,* or drinking establishment-cum-cabaret, in Istanbul and Izmir, and briefly in the similar *taverna-s* and *tekke-s* of Thessalonica and Piraeus in Greece (A. Cümbüş 2005; Sakaoğlu and Akbayar 1999).[2] Since the drinking of alcohol was officially, if not always actually, forbidden to Muslims during imperial times, these establishments invariably belonged to members of non-Muslim minority *millet-s* or 'nations,' usually to Greek proprietors, and the musicians playing in them were drawn mainly from the sizeable Greek, Armenian and Sephardic Jewish communities of the *meyhane*-s' environs (Ünlü 1998; Zat 2002). The music played there was a mixture of popular urban folk songs, adaptations of Western light classical pieces and, especially due to the gradual loss of court patronage during the nineteenth century (Pennanen 2004), Ottoman light classical genres. This last category caused a rise in both the technical sophistication and popularity of urban pop music while simultaneously alarming the art music purists, from whose point of view insult was being added to injury as classical music was not merely now evicted from the palace, but made to live amongst drunken infidels in the grand cities' poorer neighborhoods. Nonetheless many of the outstanding classical players and composers of the times found, and seem to have enjoyed, work in the *meyhane*-s. Curiously for this study, many among them who turned to the *cümbüş* or *cümbüş*-like inventions, such as Mısırlı İbrahim Efendi, Kadri Şençalar and Arap Neş'et Bey, appear mainly to be ethnically non-Turkish (Özpekel 2004).

This *meyhane*-based music culture was patronized by both the economically better off among the aforementioned minority groups, who had formed the base of Ottoman and later Turkish merchant—or 'proto-middle'—class, and by members of the later-displaced Ottoman ruling class who hadn't lost their taste for *alaturca* music (Ünlü 1998; Zat 2002). In Republican times, that is, after the Empire's loss of Thessalonica and the expulsion of Greeks and other Christians from Izmir during the 'population exchange,' it became particularly the popular music of Istanbul, where a sizeable Greek population remained until about 1964, by which time the *meyhane* was being replaced by the fancier, 'upwardly mobile,' and more often Turkish-owned *gazino-s,* in which the musical mix became more and more influenced by Western popular music (Beken 1998; Sakaoğlu and Akbayar 1999).

As well as being for the most part shunned by the classical music establishment, the *cümbüş* remained on the far periphery as a popular folk music instrument in Turkey, but there is an area in the rugged southeast, centered around the cities of Şanlıurfa, Gaziantep, and Elazığ, where it caught on as such even during the mid-1930s (Akbıyık 1999). The performance context of the music played in these cities is as different from the Istanbul *meyhane* scene as are their respective environs. The usual venue for this music is the *sıra gecesi*, or 'turn evening,' small gatherings of men in private houses, with a different group member hosting the meeting each week (thus the 'turn' in its name).[3] These gatherings are ritualized by uniform traditional dress and an expected unfolding of the evening's events: tea, long conversation, the playing of music (which also serves as lessons for the less experienced), and the sharing of food. Unlike the urban *meyhane* scene, in which a thoroughly secular and 'modernist-oriented' environment provided opportunities for the mixing of social classes, genders, and gender preferences among strangers, the *sıra gecesi* is an intimate and spiritually-oriented venue in which pre-existing traditional hierarchies are reinforced among a community of acquaintances: host and guests, teachers and students, old and young, man and (absent) woman, God and man (interview: B. Kırmızı 10/2005). The *cümbüş*, while not displacing the oud or *saz*, is a central and expected instrument in the performance of the music of these evenings.

The ethnic make-up of these eastern areas is most often described as 'mixed,' and the elements in this mix are Turkish, Kurdish and Arab, with Kurdish predominating as we move further southeast and Armenians entering the picture to the northeast (Kırmızı 2005; Akbıyık 1999). Radiating out from these cities, the *sıra gecesi* becomes less common, though the *cümbüş* remains as a folk instrument. In fact, many of the better-known players are Kurdish or Armenian, though not always publicizing their ethnicity. Nonetheless there is an increase in the production of songs or whole albums in the formerly banned Kurdish language (though such recordings in Armenian are more rare), and on either side of Turkey's long border with Iraq, though well outside of the *sıra gecesi* zone, the *cümbüş* has apparently also been a popular folk instrument among Kurds, both Muslim and Jewish (Tatar 2005)[4]

We come now to the third and predominant category of *cümbüş*-playing 'others' in Turkey. Today if you ask most self-described ethnic Turks to give you a few words they associate with the *cümbüş*, one of those words will probably be 'Gypsy.' Fethi and Alihan Cümbüş, whose family has been selling minimally between a thousand and twenty-five hundred *cümbüş*-es per year for the last seventy-five years, say the instrument was played by Romani (Gypsy) musicians even back in the early *meyhane* days, usually using the same repertoire, playing especially for weddings and

circumcision parties, and in the lower class bars (A. Cümbüş 2005). It seems that it was a matter of the other minorities' quicker assimilation into mainstream Republican-era cultural values and economic life that left the Román carrying the *cümbüş'* ethnic associations, causing popular traditional stereotypes of uneducated poverty, moral laxity and antisocial criminal tendencies to be enfolded into these. The *cümbüş* also provides yet another medium for receiving popular ideas about natural (or supernatural) talent, and of the Roman 'having music in their blood' in a way that ethnic Turks don't (though the instrument itself doesn't carry these associations).

This leads us to the need to differentiate the qualities of majority-defined Otherness between the groups mentioned so far. The otherness of Greeks, Armenians and Jews in the Ottoman and later Turkish public imaginary stemmed firstly from their being segregated non-Muslims, unassimilated and following their own laws and customs, and secondly from their economic position as the basis of the merchant class, a median position much lower than the ruling class but, until perhaps the 1950s, relatively much higher than the ordinary Turkish Muslim (Shaw 1976/1977). This position also necessarily meant having a privileged access to the outside world, and particularly to the exotic west, with which they had always been associated. Today the remainder of these populations are, if not thoroughly assimilated, at least accommodated to a virtual public invisibility in terms of separateness from the general population; their 'otherness', when not used as the screen onto which projections of Turkish relations with other nation-states are displayed, for the most part plays out safely in nostalgic negotiations over the place of multiculturalism in traditional society.[5]

The 'otherness' of the Kurds, however, is constituted on political grounds, that is, their perceived insistence on otherness has at times been taken as a threat to the state, and cultural expression that emphasizes this otherness, including musical expression and sung poetry, is traditionally understood as being dangerous and antisocial to an extreme. The results, in terms of those media, have been bans on the language and music, and nationalist protests of performers singing in Kurdish, even when, as is the case now, such performances are legal (Chatterjee 2003).

In the third case, the Roman 'otherness' is often posited as being mainly economic in nature. That is, aside from the association of poverty per se, the perceived criminal intent and lack of education of the Roman may be thought, in the mainstream modernist view, to be contingent on a lack of economic integration and prosperity.[6] Internally, also, this perception plays out in the dynamic negotiation of otherness: the more 'upwardly mobile' Romani musicians, playing in increasingly 'nicer' venues, often reject the *cümbüş* in favor of the 'classier' and more expensive *ud*, even when, due to lack of amplification, the *ud* cannot be heard (whereas the

cümbüş could be) (Öyündür and Tuzsuz 2005). In this fairly common situation, the use of the oud-that is to say the deliberate abandonment of the *cümbüş*-turns that particular musician into a purely symbolic rather than sonic contributor to the performance, embedding one otherness within another.

At the beginning of this paper I asked the question, "what do we identify as the quality of otherness?" One aspect I didn't touch on was the nature of its constitution, at least on the part of the majority, which usually has the greater power to control and perpetuate such an image (Kertzer 1988). From this perspective one of its qualities, though necessarily an unconscious one, is its capacity to act as a vessel for holding conceptions of the majority's own 'dark side,' those desires and repulsions whose manifestation, though extant within a culture's behavioral repertoire, is cognitively dissonant with hegemonic ideals of self-identification (de Beauvoir 1948). By projecting negative qualities and forbidden desires onto an 'other', or a series of others, these issues can be addressed and criticized without pointing in a direct way to structural or endemic inconsistencies within the group (de Beauvoir 1948). In my view the *cümbüş*, as a polysemic symbol, has absorbed these aspects of otherness through its early and continued use by minority musicians serving as Turkey's traditional internal others and has caused it, in a dim, semiconscious way, to reflect back projections of poverty, 'poor education,' non-Muslim-ness, immorality, political instability, and even criminal activity, as well as concepts regarding either an anti-modernist support of traditional hierarchy and religiosity (in the case of the *sıra gecesi*) or the corruption of beloved traditions (from the point of view of the classical music establishment). Also reflected are ambivalent desires about 'natural musical talent,' and others of nostalgia for the days when Atatürk was in charge and progress was still married to confidence, or even from before, when all minorities were both autonomous and firmly part of the system.

All of these are also issues prevalent in mainstream Turkish society today, and although those inconsistencies that are legitimately seen as generated from within the majority group are often publicly addressed as 'Turkish issues' (to the extent that it is politically and socially expedient to do so), there are still times and situations, as with any group actively reifying concepts of otherness, in which it is convenient to maintain traditional others to take up the overflow of self-criticism and guilty pleasure. Through-and at times in spite of-constant negotiation between popular stereotypes and their living objects (who may themselves desire an acknowledged distinction from the majority, even in fictional terms), the dialogue that constitutes otherness and makes it strategically useful, at various times for either party, contributes on the one hand to the maintenance of disparities in power, and on the other to the creation of a smoky mirror in which to gain an oblique but

useful self-reflection. In the case of Turkey, one side-effect of this process has been the creation of a particular marker of difference, visible and audible, desired by the majority as a paying audience, but generally not as a mode of musical practice for themselves. An instrument originally endorsed by Atatürk himself-and, as Ali Cümbüş notes, possibly the only 'actually' Turkish instrument, invented here rather than imported-the *cümbüş*, by its association with traditional minority communities, has been and continues to be 'the instrument of the other' in modern Turkey.[7]

1. Originally delivered as "*Cümbüş* as Instrument of the Other in Modern Turkey," which is now the title of the author's master's thesis (Ederer 2007).
2. The instrument, used to play similar repertoires, was also found in *café aman*-s and in urban (indoor) theater (i.e., in *kanto*) of the same period, but for the sake of convenience these are collapsed into the term *meyhane* music throughout this paper.
3. Although the term *sıra gecesi* is used here, it should be noted that this designation is native only to Şanlıurfa; similar phenomena are usually referred to as *kürsübaşı* — 'head (host) of the table' — and *barak gecesi* -'grace evenings' -in Elazığ and Gaziantep respectively.
4. See also Warkov 1986 regarding the Jewish-Iraqi *cümbüş* player Ezra Aharon (who led the ensemble sent to represent Iraq in the 1932 Cairo Congress on Arab Music), and Hassam 1982 for other references to the *cümbüş* in Iraq.
5. Usually without reference to the *cümbüş*, which would probably be taken as a signifier of 'Gypsiness,' a quality that is often excluded from reconstructions of traditional multiculturalism. A quick perusal of the recording catalogs of such popular Turkish music producers as Kalan Records, Golden Horn Productions (a Sony/Columbia label), and İmaj Müzik (a Universal label) will show copious examples of projects extolling the virtues of Turkey's traditional multiculturalism. See also Aksoy 2002, for a rhetorical example.
6. A deeper analysis of this subject, including a look at perceptions of 'racially inherent' (and therefore unchangeable) Román behavioral traits, appears in Ederer 2007. See also Seeman 2002.
7. Regarding the recent phenomenon of ethnic Turkish musicians playing the *cümbüş* (and its implications in terms of Otherness), see Ederer 2007.

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