

ARMENIAN YERKI BARI KHUMP'¹
TRADITION: A CULTURAL RECOVERY
WITHIN A 'MUSICKING' SOCIETY

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This paper explores Armenian *yerki bari khump* tradition that occurs as a cultural recovery for Armenians of Turkey in the 1970s. Why is it a recovery? That process can be interpreted through the transformation of Armenian society in Turkey within the historical periods such as 1915 and foundation years of Turkish Republic.

The Period of 'Collective Amnesia' and Its Reflections on Music

Armenians have been living in Istanbul since the Byzantine era. However the community life shapes especially with the foundation of Armenian Patriarchate after the conquest of city by Ottoman Empire in 1453. While the city was being rebuilt as a consequence of the war, a significant Armenian population immigrated to Istanbul in order to work as blacksmith, architect, stonemason, engraver etc. in the reconstruction of the city. That migration is seen as a historical crossroad determining the social structure of Armenians of Istanbul. Armenian population was between 120 and 234 thousands in Istanbul and more than a million in Ottoman Empire before the Turkish Republican era (Pamukciyan 2002:3-4). As the result of the terrible events that cause the deportation and deceases of thousands of Armenian people in 1915, which is still argued to name it whether "a genocide, massacre, holocaust (*Medz Yeğern*), war conditions, big catastrophe" etc., Anatolia is anymore Armenian-less. The ones who prefer living still in Turkey instead of living in diaspora or Armenia migrated to Istanbul from many regions of Anatolia by the waves of migration in 1930s, '40s and '60s. Those immigrants from Anatolia, the ones who have been living since 1915 and the ones who have come from Armenia to work in Istanbul constitute today's Armenian population in Istanbul. Istanbul becomes the home for Armenians of Turkey except the ones who live in a little village –Vakıflıköy- in Hatay and the hidden Armenians who converted to Islam in Anatolia.

In the foundation years of Turkish Republic, Official 'Turkish History' was constructed through the 'otherization' of the 'other' ethnic identities, denial of the repressive politics and forgetting the traumas at the beginning of the century. When the production and reproduction of knowledge is disrupted in a particular society, a collective amnesia sets in inevitably. Collective amnesia refers to a group's inability and/or unwillingness to remember certain traumatic events about its past. (Cuc 2003:36) So, the years from Turkish Republican period to 1970s-80s can be interpreted as the process of "collective amnesia" in which people living in Turkey forgot the history or preferred to be silenced. Those were the years also in which Armenian community integrated to Republican Turkish society. Discriminatory politics such as 20 Kur'a military service in the second world war in 1941, Wealth Tax in 1942, 6-7 September Events in 1955 etc. were also the factors on continuation of that silence and forgetting process. Consequently, cultural expressions of non-Muslims whose status modified from the *millets* of Ottoman to 'minorities' of Turkish republic were very poor in the public sphere of Turkey. Forced immigrations and displacements caused such an enclave, ghetto living for Greek, Armenian and Jewish communities of Istanbul in order to be able to sustain religious and linguistic identities.

¹ Song and Dance Ensemble

Therefore, we can say that Armenian music activities were limited with the religious music in the church between 1915 and 1960s. Armenian music was a ceremonial thing that was played in some special religious days. It was not a living thing for the life but was like a museum piece protected. There was no concept for a concert program including Armenian songs. They only sang religious songs; the only performance place was the church as a public sphere. However, in fact the survivors of 1915, named as 'first generation' had met with non-sacred Armenian music by means of Gomidas Vartabed in Istanbul between the years of 1910 and 1915. Gomidas Vartabed (Soghomon Soghomonyan) was one of the first ethnomusicologists of 20th century in Anatolia who collected and transcribed Armenian, Kurdish and Turkish folk songs (Atayan and Godakyan 2006). He organized the *Kousan* choir of 300 Armenian people in Istanbul singing both religious and folk songs and gave concerts with that choir in İstanbul, Kütahya, İzmir, Kahire and many other cities. He gave many seminars and wrote articles on Armenian 'National' Music referencing to his folk song collections (Vartabed 2001 [1908]). In the April of 1915, Gomidas was one of the Armenian intellectuals who had been taken from Istanbul for the forced immigration. His *badarag* (liturgy), some records (*taş plaks* and LPs) and folk song collections are the only material ruins of Armenian music from that memory. Furthermore, that silence process is such a cultural break that causes the cut of musical production of Armenians in Turkey for nearly 50-60 years.

Re-inventing Armenian dance and music in 1970s

Armenian community structure works within 3 basic foundations for centuries: church, school and community associations. Especially, those community associations are functional on creating a sense of solidarity between the members of the community and preserving culture, language and identity in general. At the end of the 1960s, there started a growing interest in the Armenian folklore within the leftist ideological strands in the Armenian community of Turkey. In addition, Armenian youth from universities and high schools became very active in community associations, especially in the alumni associations of the schools such as 'Alumni Association of *Surp Haç Tıbrebank* School', 'Alumni Association of *Bezciyan* School', 'Alumni Association of *Esayan* School', etc. The traces of cultural exchange with other Armenian communities were seen in cultural activities of those associations. My interviewees especially indicate their surprise when they realized the existence of secular, non-sacred Armenian musics thanks to the records imported from Lebanon, Soviet Armenia or USA. ²

The singers such as Rupen Matevosian, Ophelia Hampartzumian, Lusik Koshian, Hovhannes Badalian accompanied by popular folk ensembles like Armenian Radio Orchestra of Folk Music Instruments conducted by A. Merangulian and Armenian Song and Dance Ensemble conducted by Tatul Altunian were some of the most popular performers of 'national music' from 1930s to nowadays in Soviet Armenia. It can be realized that Tatul Altunyan's records were the main source of Istanbul Armenians on meeting and performing Armenian traditional music referring to the booklets of *yerk bar* performances of choirs and folk dance groups in Istanbul. But the main point that I'm trying to point out is that the aesthetic regard and performance practice for Armenian sound shaped through this style in Istanbul since 1960s because the only source were those.

² Interviews with Pakrat Estukyan (2009), Bartev Garyan (2010), Hayko Garabetoğlu (2010), Sezar Avedikyan (2009) and Sarkis Erkol (2010).

Especially the choral sound has been formed through those records. When you listen to any choir in Istanbul singing Armenian folk songs, you will probably listen to Tatul Altunyan's arrangements. They started to collect many records of Armenian songs, learned to sing them and realized that Armenian world was not restricted with Istanbul. It may be heard ridiculous at first but many people were not even aware of the existence of Soviet Armenia (Garyan 2010). Consequently, the borders defining Armenian ethnicity broadened for Armenian community of Turkey as a result of those records and cultural interaction with other communities in the 1970s. Firstly, the guys from the Graduate Association of the Surp Haç Tibrevank School founded a folk dance ensemble. Haçik Apelyan, Hagop Kılıç and Benon Kuzubaş as the members of that graduate association, made a journey to Yerevan, Soviet Armenia. They brought the LPs to Istanbul along with the dances that they learned there. That enterprise was too significant for flourishing of the dance and music activities in the community.

In the year of 1971, the first dance and music performance of Armenians of Istanbul was put on the stage. In the program booklet of that first performance, it was written that they had been researching Armenian folklore since 1962; their main goal was 'to put forth their culture for consideration' aiming to pioneer to other associations in the Armenian community to progress it. The repertoire that they brought from Yerevan consisted of mostly Tatul Altunyan's works, polyphonic, choral arrangements of Armenian folk music. So, they learned the dance choreographies and songs collected from Eastern (Soviet) Armenia repertoires. *Sevani Zignorsineri* (Fishermen of Sevan), *Gagaçner* (Dance of Poppies), *Lezginka, Hovuneri bar* (Dance of Shepherds), *Koçari, Govgasagan Bar* (Caucasian Dance), *Hoy Nazan, Dzağgepunç* (Flower Bouquet) are some of the most popular dances those have been performed nearly in every performances since 1970s. That repertoire was taken almost with the same choreography from Armenian State Folk and Dance Ensemble. They also tried to collect some dance figures from Anatolian Armenians migrated from the regions such as Sason, Daron, and Vaspuragan to Istanbul but that part included too limited source. Then, they made new choreographies with those figures and gave the names of those regions to the dances as if they are original. In addition, they also included Turkish Folklore excerpts from regions such as Diyarbakır, Sivas, Silifke, etc. (Garabetoğlu 2010).

On the other hand, one of the other avanguard characteristics of those performances was the idea of choir accompaniment to the dance music performance. The choir, instruments and dance ensemble were on the stage altogether. Appropriately to the church polyphonic singing traditions, those songs were being rearranged in 4 or 6 part harmony. The main aim was exhibiting Armenian folk dance and music culture and preparing an impressive performance.

Why can those *yerk bar* performances be interpreted as cultural recovery for Armenians of Turkey in the 1970s?

Reconstruction of cultural memories through dance and music

Firstly, to break down years of amnesia, it was a respond to the loss of cultural memory with a desire to reconnect with the past. As a result of the cultural exchange with other Armenian communities and becoming aware of the Armenian world, the cultural memories of Istanbul Armenians had being recovered and restructured within the realm of dance and music. Recovery was accomplished by referencing Soviet Armenia and diaspora. Music and dance memory was

imported through importing of the repertoires. Were those dance and song repertoires a real remembrance of Anatolian origin? Of course, no, they weren't. They all were the reconstructions of the lost ones. The performances of both musics and dances have become choreographed and modernized in Soviet and Caucasian styles. For instance, polyphonic folk song singing in four-part texture was not a singing style of Armenian living in an Anatolian village. Comparing to Yerevan, the orchestration was poor in terms of the instrumental diversity. The orchestras consisted of mostly accordions, zithers and dhols and rarely *ud* and violin with the lack of instruments such as *duduk*, *tar*, *kamança*, *şivi*, *zurna* characterizing Armenian sound in those records. The most popular instrument of the 1950s and 1960s was the accordion for Armenians in Istanbul. Hayko Garabetoğlu who plays in the performances since those years, tells that although accordion is not a traditional Armenian instrument, it is appropriate for playing Armenian style and with its popularity transformed as a traditional instrument for Armenians of Istanbul.

Those *yerk bar* concerts have been performed since the 1970s to nowadays not only by Surp Haç Tibrevank but also by the other associations, choirs and dance groups. It is seen that the interest and motivation of those activities not only on dance and music performances but also on folklore of Armenian people. Of course, this folklore revival of Armenians in Turkey cannot be interpreted independent from Turkish society in general. The 1960s witnessed to the consolidation of performance-based folklore activities (Öztürkmen 2006:194-205) Therefore, Armenian young people also were impressed by those folklore winds. Some of them also were the members of institutions such as *Türk Folklor Kurumu*. The interest on folklore is specifically observable on the concert program booklets of those *yerk bar* performances. The published programs of the performances consisting the repertoire were organized as a comprehensive booklet aiming to inform audiences on Armenian folklore in general. They also included some articles on definition and content of folklore as a research area, specific information about Armenian dances and musics.

The most influential part of those booklets was the section about the Armenian costume tradition taken by the books of 19th century. Similarly, in the booklet of *Talar* dance ensemble performance in 2001, they present the illustrations of old Armenian village costumes. However, the most influential aspect of those presentations is the symbolic 'recovery' of folklore with exhibiting both the old and the new ones and proofing how real they are. Members of the group sew the costumes for the performances according to those drawings, take photographs of those new costumes and show them together in order to point out the authenticity, continuity, and cultural transmission.

Memory is always in the making, a continuous process of construction and reconstruction. Cultural memory maintains individuals' perceptions of continuity between past and the community's present existence. According to Halbwachs, who is one of the founders of memory studies, collective memory is the reconstruction of the past. It is always written today and also reflects today (Assmann 2001:44). Consequently, musical memory is evoked within the *yerk bar* performances for Armenians in Turkey even if its shape is different from the past versions. Those *yerk bar* performances are typically a mean of struggle against becoming absorbed or assimilated by the mainstream Turkish culture. Those performances have many symbolic meanings for the construction of the community. Opening a parenthesis; an imagination of monolithic, ethnicity-

based, homogenous identification for any community should be avoided in sociological and ethnomusicological research. In my interpretations, I'm referring the actors that have roles in those associations and the people who support them whether watching the performances, funding the performances, listening to the LP records, organizing the concerts etc. In *Symbolic Construction of Community* (1985), Anthony Cohen proposes that rather than thinking of community as an integrating mechanism, it should be regarded as instead as an aggregating device. In his approach, the 'commonality' which is found in community need not be a uniformity (1985:25). He proposes to consider the 'use' of the term instead of its lexical meaning and focuses on the element, which embodies the sense of discrimination, namely, the boundary. So, the members of community share the symbol, but do not necessarily share its meaning. "As a symbol, it is held in common by its members; but it's meaning varies with its members' unique orientations to it" (1985:15).

On the one hand, community is saying that "we are still here as Armenians!" through those *yerk bar* performances. On the other hand 'auto-censorship' is a strong way of self-protection against state. To exemplify; if there was an inconvenient word such as 'Yerevan' -the capital of Soviet Armenia- or *Hayastan*- meaning the land of Armenian- in the lyrics of the songs, the members of the choir removed that word from the lyrics or changed it with another non-political word such as *Vartastan* (the land of Rose) in order to prevent the misunderstandings and not to have trouble with officials in the 1970s and 1980s (Estukyan 2009).

One of the other functions of *yerk bar* tradition is bringing community members together and providing continuity of cultural, social and ethnic relations through Armenian identity. Those were the key ingredients, the integral part of the cultural identity in the process of new generation's acculturation, defining who they were. Additionally, the choirs and dance ensembles have their separate children performance groups in order to provide cultural transmission. Those children ensembles take the name of the adults ones with the diminutive suffix '-ig' in Armenian, as in the case of Maral(ig) and Talar(ig). The ones who are educated from this children choir or dance group attend the adults' ones when they are growing up.

Those musicking centers give the opportunity to members to be part of Armenian community life. I especially use the term 'musicking' instead of 'music' as referencing a theoretical frame of Christopher Small. He proposes the verb form of music that encompasses all musical activity instead of the noun form that signifies music as an abstract thing. Small demonstrates how musicking forms a ritual through which all the participants explore and celebrate the relationships that constitute their social identity. Small propose the definition for 'musicking':

"To music is to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing, by providing material for performance (what is called composing), or by dancing. We might at times even extend its meaning to what the person is doing who takes the tickets at the door or the hefty men who shift the piano and the drums or the roadies who set up the instruments and carry out the sound checks or the cleaners who clean up after everyone else has gone. They, too, are all contributing to the nature of the event that is a musical performance" (1998:9).

According to the definition, Small points out the process of music, not the musical work as a thing. So every social relation that contributes to the process can be appreciated and valued as a musical activity. In that context, those musicking community centers give the opportunity to

members to be part of Armenian community life. Beginning in early childhood, people are exposed to a basic cultural formation within the activities of those associations and those associations function as creating 'national space' to carry 'cultural heritage'. Those centers are likely a second family for the members and those associations and their activities are a natural response to the needs of the community. So, the symbolic potential of the *yerk bar* performances for political resistance, or their reconnection with a forgotten past had an impact on the collective imagined construction of the community.

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