

## MUSIC AS REPRESENTATION OF ETHNICITY AND IDENTITY: REVISITING MUSICAL CULTURE OF TURKEY IN 1990S

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This work focuses on a special period of Turkey, namely the 1990s, and aims to examine the repercussions of the many historical/political changes through 1990s in the realm of music. I approach the period not in the broader context of Turkey's musical scene and its political culture but from the perspective of ethnicity and identity in relation with music.

My data is mainly based on the interviews (made in 2007-2008) with musicians (from Istanbul) singing in different languages such as Turkish, Kurdish, Armenian, Greek, Laz, Circassian, Arabic, et al. whose majority began to appear within the musical sphere by 90s; the interviews with representatives of music companies who adopted the musical category 'ethnic musics' or 'ethnic musics of Anatolia' as a new genre within their catalogues (such as 'Kalan' which was established in 1992); and also my personal experience as a member of 'Kardeş Türküler Project' (which was founded in 1992) as well as talks within a circle of friends most of whom were students in Boğaziçi University by late 80s and early 90s.

### **Let me begin with a simple question: Who live in Turkey?**

Without a doubt, Turkey is a country with linguistic and cultural diversity which was shaped through a long time of history, but it was not such easy to talk about diversity only fifteen or twenty years ago. There happened a change (although limited) in Turkey within 1990s which became mostly visible through its cultural scene. So, what happened in 1990s? Perhaps for the first time, identities had begun to be mentioned and discussed in the public sphere, by broad sections of the public.

Then, if now we are able to talk about the cultural and linguistic diversity of Turkey, then what kind of a unity was it which prevailed in the past?

### **Nations/Nation-states**

Beginning from the early 1900s and then adopted by the new Republican Regime (established in 1923), the new nation-state was constructed around Turkishness (which involves the notion of being Muslim 'naturally') accompanied by the nationalist policies: One nation – One language – One State!

Nations are generally assumed to be societies composed of like individuals sharing the same history and culture, a single language, religion and ethnicity. Allegiance to a nationality is superior to and takes precedence over all other bonds and allegiances. On the other hand, people living in the same land may be organized around many different allegiances, and may constitute a variety of communities and groups. Nationalism claims that one of these (namely, the allegiance to the nation) is primary and predominant over the others. So, such construction processes must first struggle with issues arising from different ethnicities, languages and religions by the way of assimilationist policies. The struggles around ethnicity and identity in 1990s expressed the belief in relief from the burden of the past, and brought the message that the assimilationist policies

in practice for years in this country had gone bankrupt (Özer 2008). In other words, the political atmosphere of 1990s was dominated by the appearance of reaction against the previous policies in various ways as Zafer Yörük explains from a musical aspect:

“I think the musical equivalent of the suppression of cultures in Turkey is *Yurttan Sesler Korosu* (The Choir of Voices from Homeland). To accompany the construction of the Turkish nation-state, the songs from all over the country were collected, standardized and Turkified. The folk songs performed by *Yurttan Sesler Korosu* were presented to the audience as ‘Turkish folk music.’ If we accept the years from 1920s to 1950s as the period of suppression in Turkey, then 1990s could be called as the years of recovery” (Günay ve Uncu 2007:399).

There is no doubt that the processes of creating a national musical tradition to accompany the establishment of a Turkish nation-state has deeply affected the way all of us think about our music and culture<sup>1</sup>. Here is a striking example from academic circles:

“The academic research about folk music and culture was limited to a certain framework. Unless you have accepted Anatolian culture as uniform and homogeneous, you are not allowed to make your research on any field by the academic authorities. You could not even suggest extending these limits and even use the term ‘ethnic’” (Akkaya ve Çelik 2007:333)

Interestingly by 1990s, academic circles as well as the other sections of the public began to show interest (if limited) in works showing the in-homogeneous/non-uniform parts of Anatolian culture. At that point, it might be helpful to revisit the political atmosphere of the period.

### Revisiting 1990s

The period from the second half of the 80s to the early 90s was one of many different changes in the world. We should especially mention the developments in Thrace, Caucassia and Mesopotamia -all in the neighborhood of Turkey- such as the collapse of the USSR and the entire Eastern Block from 1989-91; the breakup of the former Yugoslavia and the following conflicts in the Balkans; the first Gulf War following Iraq’s occupation of Kuwait in 1990...

<sup>1</sup> It was in this period also that the national musical tradition, which held a significant place in the construction of a Turkish national identity and culture, was “invented”. Two main routes were set forth in the invention of a national musical tradition. The first was to adopt a western approach to music to achieve a modern level of civilization. The second was to use “pure and untouched” traditional folk melodies as the construction materials for this project. The period from 1923 to 1950 in particular, was a time of radical institutionalization and activities in the area of music towards this end (Öztürk 2007). The members of the *Mızika-yı Hümayun* were brought to Ankara to form *Riyaset’i Cumhuriyet Orkestrası* (Orchestra of the Prime Ministry), *Musiki Muallim Mektebi* (Music Teachers’ College) was founded, the group of musicologist-composers known as the “Turkish Five” were sent abroad for education (Öztürk 2007). For a period, radio broadcast of Ottoman-Turkish music was prohibited. The *Dar’ül-Elhan* was changed into the Istanbul Municipal Conservatory, and its Eastern Music section was closed, because it was off the agenda, and monophonic. After all, in order to sever the bond with the Ottoman Empire, it was necessary to sever the bond with the Ottoman musical tradition. In the musical arena, the road to the level of modern western society was through the western polyphonic approach. The State Conservatory was founded in Ankara, and scholars and music teachers were invited from abroad. Piano and violin became the main instruments, and folk songs began to be collected and harmonized in western patterns. The folk songs being collected were notated according to the diatonic system; microtones were discarded and local styles were ignored (Hasgül 1996). These works, which would be used for teaching purposes as well as a source of inspiration for modern composers in the works they would create, were collected and performed by the *Yurttan Sesler Korosu* (Voices from the Homeland Chorus) at the chief broadcasting institution of the period, TRT Radio. Because of the decrease in the state’s interest in folk music, these collection activities were halted in the 1950s. In the continuation of this process, and in association with urbanization, an era would begin in which urban popular culture would gain strength; in this period, folk music would come onto the agenda once again but in a different form (Öztürk 2007). At the same time, songs collected were categorized under the heading of ‘Turkish folk songs’ and as ‘anonymous’. In this way, familiar songs were added to the repertoire of Turkish folk music. Thus one of the processes necessary for the construction of a common culture was achieved.

Without a doubt, the most important development which accelerated the cultural identity-based opposition in Turkey in the 90s, is directly related to the experiences of the Kurdish people living within Turkey and the Middle East. By the early 90s, as a result of internal and international pressures, the government had softened its stance on the recognition of the Kurdish presence, which up to then had been denied.

For example, in 1991 the prohibition against Kurdish music was ‘officially’ (although continued its presence in practice) lifted (the Law, number 2932). Following this, Kurdish albums which previously were reproduced illegally and much listened to especially in student circles quickly began to be produced by music companies such as Ses Plak, Kom Müzik, Kalan, etc.

The struggle towards achieving recognition of the Kurdish identity soon began to influence the discourse around other ethnic identities as Ayşenur Kolivar explains: “One day I came to the dormitory and saw friends listening to a music on the cassette player in a language other than Turkish. I asked them who he was. It was Şivan Perwer and he was singing in Kurdish. Then I kept asking myself: ‘We, the Laz people, also have Laz songs; but where are they?’” (Özer 2008)

Here is another anecdote from Birol Topaloğlu: “My mother used to sing lullabies and *destans*. Everywhere you could hear the sound of *tulum* and *kemençe*. *Lazca* as a different language was present but I always felt that it was something forbidden as if speaking *Lazca* were a sin or a shame. At that point I began asking questions to myself...” (Akkaya 2007:253-4).

In order to find the answers to the questions like Birol asks to himself and discover their songs, people like Ayşenur and Birol took the road to their homelands in order to collect the songs and stories from their elders.

By the discovery of their cultural differences, people began to realize that culture is a living thing, not a frozen one and not something to be kept in museums as Pakrat Estukyan tells us:

“Formerly we have not realized that Armenian music is a living thing. We used to think that Armenian songs are to be performed only in special days or to accompany religious events. For example, during our weddings, we used to play ‘Kadifeden Kesesi’ in order to dance, but we did not know an Armenian dance song. Armenian music was not present in our daily lives. We began to show interest in our traditional musics and dances by 1970s which accelerated by 1990s” (Yıldız ve Öney 2007:364).

In this period, people began to explore their roots, to discover their hidden, whitewashed histories, to bring what was suppressed out into the light; because they felt the need for roots to establish themselves in a ground about which people were just beginning to speak. This is necessary for a start, and must be protected as Hasan Saltık from Kalan Company says:

“Formerly, nobody said ‘I’m of such-and-such a descent.’ One thing Kurdish movement brought to the people of Turkey was this: People gained the ability to express their descent very freely. The truth of the matter is that now, everyone explores their roots, and is now able to say ‘I’m Kurdish, I’m Laz, I’m Armenian...’ Whereas before, the nation-state was saying ‘Everyone who lives on these lands is Turkish,’ this situation suddenly changed, and turned around completely. I remember, before, we were even afraid to say ‘I’m Alevi.’ For example, in Tunceli, where I’m from, when someone asked ‘Where are

you from?’ people would say ‘I’m from Elazığ.’ People were hesitant to say they were Alevi – whether they were a state civil servant, a police officer, an officer in the army... In the 1990s, following publications/releases of materials dealing with ethnic cultures and music, this began to be explored and questioned. This is a gain; to explore and find your own past, your roots” (Özer ve Öney 2007:304)

People began discovering their cultural identities and turning them into an open means of expression. Naturally, against the dominant discourse which had been under construction for decades, the expression of differences did not come onto the agenda in the context of ‘freedom’, but rather from the perspective of a struggle for ‘liberation’. Hence the musics which accompanied the struggles around the expression of cultural identities took the form of opposition musics in 1990s as Bülent Forta from Ada Music Company mentions:

“Starting from the beginning of 1990s, we can see new opposition channels and a redirection to these new channels mainly arising from defeat in the world – also in Turkey. For the world left, belief in the idea of constructing a new society-an idea emphasizing importance of ethnical cultural elements, led to identity policies, increasing awareness to women movement and environmental issues. Not only in music, say in European academies, numerous women studies, articles on feminist theory, discussion on ethnicity and socialization are the signs of awakening movement from an intellectual dream. It has started in the beginnings of 1990s. There also was a dominant idea: ‘It is the end of history’, it is a theory by Fukuyama somehow stating that there is no other life but our concurrent lives. If you consider the contradiction between this dominant assertion and our lives, you cannot assume a strong opposition will arise. It raised. In many countries, cultural differences and suppressed ones developed a new opposing language, which was also supported by traditions, also which did not have so definitive boundaries. It revealed itself in rap and hip-hop in North American streets. It was the sound of streets, also imitated in Turkey. Whether you like or dislike, it is the period Eminem becomes a star. This opposition music took different forms in different countries” (Özer ve Okçu 2007:264-5).

The struggles around the expression of cultural difference also encouraged the non-Muslim communities to organize activities within the public sphere:

“Formerly people would tell us ‘Here is Turkey! Do your activities for yourselves and give your concerts only to Armenian audience! Why would you call for the attention of Turkish people through the advertisements in Turkish newspapers? If twenty fascists who read the advertisement come and try to get in, are you going to be able to provide the security within the concert hall?’ Such kind of arguments declined by 1990s” (Yıldız ve Öney 2007:359-60).

By 1990s, the cultural and linguistic diversity of Turkey was made clear especially within the musical realm. For example; new music companies were established such as Kalan, Kom, Ses, etc. and ‘ethnic musics from Anatolia’ as a new genre/category began to appear within the catalogues of these newly established companies or adapted by the older ones such as Ada.

The technological developments especially accelerated the emerging of new musical genres. We should mark the beginning with Turgut Özal’s policies. Beginning of 1980s was

marked by Turgut Özal – first Prime Minister of post coup era- and his deregulation of strict foreign trade policies. All kind of technological products were flooded after this liberation. During 1970s around the world, vinyl records were already replaced by magnetic tapes. By 1980s in Turkey, cassette players and walkmans made their ways to our homes. New studios were established. Synthesizers became the most critical element of music studios and musical production process. Electronic instruments, supported by the spreading of personal computers, provided an easy way to compose music. Such consumable and cheaper form of music gave its way to ‘Turkish pop music boom’ by early 1990s. Although Turkish pop music is behind the scope of this work, I should say that it became influential in the recovery of Turkish music industry. At this period many recording studios and new music companies had been established, private TV and radio channels began broadcasting, etc.

Turkish music industry for a period was dominated by major companies as Raks and Prestij, providing a mass production. We can say that this period lasted by the mid of 1990s and it also collapsed culturally, followed by the emergence of an anti-thesis, a resistance culture –somehow inspired from movements of 1970s and 1980s- having surprisingly high sales figures. This situation has also changed the structure of both music itself and the record companies. Some alternative ‘independent’ companies –mostly had insignificant presence in prior periods- gained a high importance with their adoption of this alternative music. We can say that the most important contribution to the industry was made with the foundation of Kalan Music Company.

“Kalan was founded in 1991. At the beginning of 1990s, there were majors like Raks and Universal. The people used to listen özgün müzik those times. On the other hand, there was the flood of taverna music everywhere in Turkey: Arif Susam, Cengiz Kurtoğlu et al. With the first money we earned, we began collecting and buying the copy rights of old musical repertoire. Later we began releasing the albums of rock groups like Kesmeşeker. Then many newspaper writers took care of us. We asked ourselves: ‘What shall we do from now on culturally and how will we do these?’ We said we should not only release Kurdish music but also, for example, Armenian music and we released the series of Armenian Folk Songs. Besides, we released the albums of Georgia, Turkic Republics, Klezmer music, Rebetica music et al. There are many good companies in Europe and US which are working as a library, as a cultural institution. I began following these. I called for people who knew about these matters. I knew Neşet Ertaş but I didn’t listen to him seriously. I didn’t know about Muharrem Ertaş at all! American companies had released the vinyl records of Tanburî Cemil Bey, I didn’t also know about him. They had bought the copy rights of Cemil Bey, Udî Hrant... We got them back. Then people from different areas began supporting Kalan. I think this is because Kalan Music has presented a wide range of cultural politics” (Özer ve Öney 2007:303)

As Hasan Saltık has asserted, the companies and projects who had presented the richness and diversity of different cultures of Turkey succeeded to survive in 1990s since they could answer the demands of people who wanted to live together and under equal rights in Turkey. This was an interesting situation because some musicians and music groups could become popular (in the sense of meeting with not a few number of audience) in this way even without using the inevitable tools of mass media. The only thing they did was to catch the spirit

of the period and reflect it in a musical language. Erkan Oğur, Bülent Ortaçgil, Zuğuş Berepe, Kazım Koyuncu, Birol Topalođlu, Aynur Dođan, Koma Amed and Kardeş Türküler are some of the names within this musical arena.

As an overall picture, it is safe to say that the 1990s witnessed a significant change of culture in Turkey: A large number of cultural centers opened; publishing houses began to include publications dealing with ethnic and cultural diversity, also a new genre called 'etnik edebiyat' emerged; magazines and newspapers began to be published in different languages; a variety of television channels and radio stations began broadcast both on a local and national scale; celebrations and festivals which brought various sections of society together began to be held, new music companies were founded and new musicians/groups began to perform; and songs began to be sung in languages which had theretofore been prohibited.

On the other hand, this was not such an easy and romantic period since the people struggling for self-expression were subjected to the reactions either from the state or from different sections of the public in the form of suppression, censorship, bans, or even in the most violent way.

The gains of the struggles in 1990s became visible especially by early 2000s. The new changes which took place in the early 2000s, must be evaluated in light of the new phases of our country's past fifteen year-old war, and the steps toward democracy forced by the European Union (EU) membership process. It is no coincidence that a great many 'firsts' have been achieved during this period: for the first time, groups singing in languages other than Turkish have been allowed to give concerts in the East; and during this same period, various festivals have begun to be held in provinces such as Diyarbakır, Batman and Tunceli, to which many musicians from Istanbul have been invited. In addition, the inclusion (if limited) by TRT of broadcasts in some languages other than Turkish in 2004, as a result of pressure from the EU must be viewed in a similar context. It was in this period when 'Turkey as a cultural mosaic' began to be discussed within broad sections of the public and even certain high-level government officials used the word 'Türkiyeli' [as opposed to 'Turk'] in order to signify a citizen of Turkey. The continuation of the period needs further analysis which is beyond the scope of this work.

### **Conclusion: What does the study of music tell us about all these processes through 1990s?**

- Music evoked the awareness of cultural difference.
- The construction of identity was accompanied by the creation of new musical forms or adapting older ones in different ways.
- Musicians began collecting songs and stories from elders.
- Folk songs became political while the political message in music might be absent; it was usually in the political context of the time which made them political.
- Emphasizing differences (instead of emphasizing commonalities over differences) became a way of self-expression.
- Focusing on music could illuminate the patterns of inter ethnic contact.
- Music has the power of showing people how cultural diversity and plurality could be kept and protected on the basis of a common sense of humanity.

This work should be evaluated as an attempt within comparative studies. I believe that comparative study of music and society provide an alternative basis for exploring the relations in and between different cultural groups. Music helps us to search for the ways of creating a space for a cultural pluralism in which each group/individual can find “an equal room of their own” but also are aware that they are sharing a whole!

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