

Thought Short Report**Cultural interrelationships between Turkish minstrel tradition and Egyptian folk culture in the socio-cultural context of coffeehouses in Alexandria and Cairo****Özkul Çobanoğlu**

Özkul Çobanoğlu, was born the 23/10/1961 in Turkey. He is full Professor of Turkish and Comparative Folklore at Hacettepe University in Ankara, Turkey. He specializes in Turkish folk culture and cultural, literary and religious trends in the broader Turkic world. He has taught as a guest lecturer at the Eastern Mediterranean University in Northern Cyprus; Jagelleon University in Poland and at other Universities (in Hungary, Kosovo, Ukraine and Estonia). He has published widely on folklore theories, the history of Turkish folklore, genres of Turkish folk literature, the Turkish minstrel tradition, Turkish entertainment history, Turkish epics, Turkish proverbs, Turkish mythology, and Turkish folk beliefs.

*Hacettepe University, Faculty of Letters, Department of Turkish Folkloristics Studies, 06532 Beytepe-Ankara, Turkey
E.mail : ozkul@hacettepe.edu.tr*

The subject of this paper is the cultural interrelationships between Turkish minstrel tradition and Egyptian folk culture in the socio-cultural context of Alexandria and Cairo coffeehouses. It is well-known that such an evaluation outside of a historical socio-cultural context would be meaningless. As the great Egyptian novelist Necip Mahfuz describes in his famous novel, “The Street of Midak”, in 1940’s Cairo, an Egyptian minstrel goes to a coffeehouse to perform the art of narration with his two string instruments and his book. The coffeehouse owner, Kirşa, was upset when he saw him and said, “My customers are asking to listen to the radio; they don’t want minstrels anymore and now I am installing a radio. Get out of here, by God’s curse on you.”(Mahfuz 1995:9). This not only was the picture in 1940’s Cairo, but İstanbul, Ankara, Konya, etc. and any of the big cities in Turkey as well. Necip Mahfuz summarizes the entire process by simply saying, “Radio has come and the minstrel tradition is gone” (Mahfuz 1995:14).

For this reason, it would be useful to take a closer look at coffeehouses. As is well-known about them as social drinking places, coffeehouses were not entirely prohibited by some 16th.-century Islamic scholars and statesmen. Moreover, by the middle of the same century, coffeehouses had become one of the most important socio-cultural dynamics affecting not only domestic areas of the Ottoman State and all of its Islamic lands but, it is possible to say, most of the world within two-hundred years or so. If we consider the affect of coffeehouses on the Ottoman State and its Muslim populations, coffeehouses were new public institutions open to all kinds of people. In fact, they were the first and most important non-religiously oriented institutions of socialization for Muslims and others. Although members of sufi orders introduced coffee to Muslims, sufis lost their original position or, it would be better to say, became ordinary customers at coffeehouses over time. Financially successful coffeehouses, as economic-oriented business places, quickly flourished throughout the Ottoman State, resulting in great competition among owners.

In this context, the Turkish military literary tradition (Ordu Şâirleri), the Divân literary tradition (Divân Edebiyatı), and the sufi tradition (Tekke-Tasavvuf Edebiyatı), established in the 12th century by Tekkes institutions, were influenced by coffeehouses in many ways. These business venues became open forums for all literary traditions, giving rise to yet another flourishing one, the Turkish non-religious minstrel tradition. Its orientation was entertainment for the ‘folk’ or customers. With coffeehouses not being religion-oriented like tekkes and medreses, this thrust was the actual reason minstrels teleologically created non-religious poems. They therefore transformed and adapted many old Turkish literary genres and customs to the new features of culturally new places, coffeehouses. Coffeehouses and their economic goals involving the need to entertain – by shaping the themes, structure and function of old traditions - had an affect similar to the radio many years later: ‘Coffeehouses came and the tekkes lost their previous importance in Muslim society.’

In that regard, it is well-known that Egypt was a center for Turkish sufi orders started especially by Kaygusuz Abdal and his followers of the Bektaşî-Alevî literary tradition. After establishment of coffeehouses, however, this new-born and non-religiously oriented minstrel tradition of the Turks (Âşık Tarzı Edebiyat Geleneği), with

its followers, was also drawn to Egyptian coffeehouses in Cairo and Alexandria. Especially in Cairo, one of the earliest coffeehouses was opened directly across from the Yeniçeri Garrison, explaining a great deal, I think, since the garrison patronized the newly-created tradition until the institution of garrisons was abolished throughout the Ottoman State.

Further, regarding Alexandria coffeehouses, we have even more information given by a practitioner of Turkish minstrel performance. His pen name is Âşık Kenzî,, born in the 19th. century in Nicossia , Cyprus, educated in Anatolia and later becoming one of the most famous minstrels in Anatolia, Egypt and the Balkans. For example, Kenzî describes one coffeehouse in Alexandria as follows:

*''*Our coffeehouse is a place that makes cheerful the followers of true love who are bohemians faithfully frequenting this coffeehouse.*''

* Ehl-i aşka bir makaam-ı dil-küşâdır kahvemiz/Pâk ü cem'i-i rind-ü erbâb-i vefâdır kahvemiz. (Fedai 1989:102)

*''*Up to now, no one has seen such a beautiful, charming building; not only not in the city of Alexandria but throughout the world is there not such rare beauty.*''

* Böyle bir rengîn binâ görmüş değil çeşm-i cihan/Şehr-i İskender değil, âlemde nâdir kahvemiz. (Fedai 1989:102).

*''*Our coffeehouse's doors are open to the markets and streets; as the first place in their lives, it is the place for people who value fidelity.*''

* Bâb-u revzenler küşâde sûk u catde her taraf/Cây-ı gâh-i zümre-i kân-i vefadır kahvemiz. (Fedai 1989:102).

*''*One who sits in our coffeehouse can watch the sea, like İstanbul's Yeni Kapı coffeehouses.*''

*Rû-yi deryayi temâşâ eyle İslambol gibi/Reşk-ider bâb-i cedîde pür safâdır kahvemiz. (Fedai 1989:102).

*''*O you, the minstrel Kenzî, let people know the history of this coffeehouse built in one-thousand two-hundred and fifty*'' (by the İslamic calender).

* Kenzî gelsün rub-ı meskûn halkı târih seyrine/Bin iki yüz ellide şîrin binâder kahvemiz (Fedai 1989:102).

According to Âşık Kenzî, the coffeehouse was on the coast like those in Istanbul's Yenikapı, and was next to the city market. However, it can easily be said it had the finest features of any all over Ottoman State simply upon the basis of competition among coffeehouses. Such physically nice features would attract more customers, and especially being next to the market would appeal to businessmen patronizing it for entertainment.

And competition was the primary reason that the non-religious minstrel literary tradition was born in coffeehouses - in other words, as far as I at least know, Turkish coffeehouses quickly became literary and performance forums for poets, with the Turkish minstrel tradition adopting and creating various ways to please customers. One of those ways was known as "song contests" or "poetry duels" (âşık atışma fasılları) among minstrels. Another genre was called "hanging riddles" (askı bilmece/bulmaca) whereupon coffeehouse owners, sometimes minstrels, put publicly-unknown items in boxes. Visiting minstrels were challenged to guess the boxes' contents and win prizes determined by whomever "hanged the riddle". When more than one minstrel participated, involving both of the afore-mentioned genres, minstrels competed with recitations of improvised poems while duelling by way of insulting each other. Once, Kenzî competed with two Turkish minstrels from İstanbul to win a "hanging of riddle" prize at a coffeehouse in Alexandria, as he says:

**"Everybody thinks that being a poet is such a easy job; however, there is no way a raven (karga) can become a nightingale (bülbul) even if it stays in a cage for 100 years."*

**"Her kişi şâirliği âsan sanup etmiş heves/Amma kuzgun bülbul olmaz beklese yüzyıl kafes."*(Fedai 1993a:123).

**These self-declared poets disturb people in coffeehouses with their horrible voices sounding like storks (leylek) or vultures (kerkenes) (Alpine)."*

** Halkı taciz etdiler heb kahvelerde savt ile/Kimi legleg dâ'l baygu kimi zağî kerkenes"*(Fedai 1993a:123).

**"Playing the Turkish guitar very well is not enough to qualify one as a true poet; no way is there that an ordinary river stone can be considered a pearl."*

*“Şâ’ir olamaz her keş saz çalmağile sâde/Çay taşı yerin tutmaz hiç lû’lû-i lâlâyî.
”(Fedai 1993a:123).

*’’Two pseudo-poets came here (Alexandria) from Istanbul to win the prize of the hanged riddle (*askı*) from my hands; one is like a damn chick-pea tree (*nohut*), the other is unbelievably greedy.’’

* Gûya ki Sitanbuldan gelmişdir iki herze/Birine Nohut Tûba birine buhâlâyî. ”(Fedai 1993a:123).

*’’Those two came to wrest the *askı* prize from our hands, one of them like a crippled (*çolak*) dog, the other totally decrepit (*dü-müyâyî*).’’

* Askıyı elimizden almasına gelmişler/Birisi Çolak Kıtımır birisi dü-müyâyî. ”(Fedai 1993a:123).

*’’Oh you, the poet Kenzi, do not let them take the prize of the hanged riddle (*askı*); at least you must take the fabric (*kumaslar*) which definitely should be yours....’’

* Kenzî hele gör vermez ele öngdülün/İçinden almayınca parçayı heb çuhayî” (Fedai 1993a:265).

According to the last line, it seems that Kenzî was very close to losing the prize and was trying to ‘bargain’ about it.

We nonetheless can learn more about Alexandria coffeehouses from Kenzî’s poems. For instance, he wrote about the death of a coffeehouse owner:

*’’This is the man who is stingy in the coffeehouses of Alexandria, the shameless one who made dancing boys a part of his coffeehouse business.’’

*Budur ol varyemez İskender içre kahve çokdan/Köçekler oynadırdı kahvesinde âr-u ğayretsiz. (Fedai 1989:118)

*’’He pretended he was Muslim by taking ‘abdest’ all the time and praying divine worship (*salat/namaz*) 5 times every day though he did not even have *tahret* (purification) at all.’’

*Müselman göründü suretâ abdest alub dâim/Kıldardı gerçe ol beş vaktini ammâ tahâretsiz. (Fedai 1989:118)

*’’He, the coffeehouse owner Eyyub, did not like sufis (*dervişans*) and never the poets (*âşiks*); he always was suspicious of them and lying about sufis and poets.’’

**Begenmezdi gürûh-i dervîşâni, şâiri aslaa/İderdi ta'n-ü bühtân-i hezâran ol hakikatsiz. (Fedai 1989:118)*

*''In the end he was smitten by a sufi's curse (inkisar), as though stricken by an arrow of the Sa'd-ı Vakkas without any sign.''

**Nihâyet inkisar-ı dervîşâne uğrayub ol har/Hadeng-i sa'd-ı vakkas urde yok itdi işâretsiz. (Fedai 1989:118)*

*That dog, I mean, the coffee house owner Eyyub, died in bed, with his ugly and horrible wishes – how is it a real Muslim (mümin) can not be happy and joyful in death?''

**O it bir bed emel içre geberdi ki ma'âza'llah/Olur mu bu ölümdede merd olan mü'min sa'âdetsiz. (Fedai 1989:118)*

*''Instead of mercy, let his soul be (lanet) cursed until the resurrection (haşr), because he was the unlimited enemy of the house of Ali like Mervan.''

**Okunsun cânına rahmet yerinde haşre dek lâ'net/Adûy-yi âl-i evlad idi mervan nihayetsiz. (Fedai 1989:118)*

*''Oh, you poet Kenzi, I recited a history to record his death by punctuation (menkuut), this, the coffeehouse master Eyyub, who suddenly died without the testimony of Islam. (profession of faith) (şehadet).''

**Dedim menkuut ile Kenzi anın da fevtine târih/Çub âsâ Eyyub Usta ansızın gitdi şehâdetsiz (Fedai 1989:118)*

It is obvious that Kenzî did not like the coffeehouse owner Eyyub because Eyyub did not allow minstrels to perform at his establishment. Instead of the minstrel literary tradition, he preferred dancing boys for customer entertainment. It seems likely that was the real reason Âşık Kenzî did not like him, and recounted all of his bad characteristics in a hateful way which constituted a social criticism that could scarcely have been more harsh. However, this poem is important inasmuch as it demonstrates the various types of coffeehouses there were and their entertainment preferences, further illuminating the harsh nature of competition in that business sector.

To further examine that aspect of the matter, it is necessary to consider the people who patronized coffeehouses: Turks, Arabs, statesmen and state workers, pilgrims, caravan travelers, sufis, tradesmen, seamen and a combination of others from a wide variety of places throughout the Ottoman territories.

For instance, it is a minstrel tradition to improvise 'customized' songs – in a flattering manner – for wealthy and famous people in audiences.

In return, the song recipients give “money” or “special gifts” to the minstrels. For example, a wealthy person belonging to a well-known family in Smyrna whose name was Sherif, on a pilgrimage to Mecca was the subject of Kenzi’s poem two lines of which are -

**That lovely person whose face is bright like full moon, came from Smyrna (İzmir) to Alexandria and set our hearts on fire.”*

**“Gelüb İskenderiyye şehrine İzmirden ol meh rû/Bütün kundak bıraktı dilleri süzânelendirdi” (Fedai 1993a:284).*

However, Âşık Kenzî poems make it clear that not all coffeehouse customers were Turks, i. e., there are three poems in Kenzî’s notebooks called “welcome songs” or “poems”. In literary material of this type, minstrels introduce themselves to the audience, using such poems as ‘get-acquainted ice-breakers’. According to Kenzî’s welcome poems, audiences at coffeehouses where he performed were not only Turks, but at least Arabs because he used Arabic and Turkish in three welcome songs:

“Merhaba

**O, you the poet, who says such rare things, ehlen ve sehlen merhaba, you, the poet Kenzî, your existence adorns the earth, ehlen ve sehlen merhaba...*

**“Ey şâir-i nâdire gû/Ehlen ve sehlen merhaba/Zeyn eyledin bezmi kamu/Ehlen ve sehlen merhaba” (Fedai 1993b:2).*

Moreover there are two more poems written or recited with alternating lines in Turkish and Arabic, a written and/or spoken style known “mulemma” (mixture). That demonstrates Âşık Kenzi was a bilingual Turkish minstrel using both languages to please his multilingual and multinational audiences.

In conclusion, it seems clear that Cairo and Alexandria coffeehouses attracted multi-lingual and multinational audiences sharing representatives of the Turkish minstrel tradition. We do not have much information about multi-lingual contest among minstrels at coffeehouses that most probably occurred. But one can reasonably and easily assume that similar performances took place in the cases of Kaaraguzati and hekavatis. But I think that possibility needs more research regarding sources to discover the development of such events. That would demonstrate how both folk cultures were interacting at coffeehouses.

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