The Âşıks

Poet-minstrels of Empire, Enduring Voice of the Margins

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With Commentary by Alex G. Papadopoulos

Introduction

Thomas Korovinis' ethnography of the poet-musician community of the Âşıks is the result of exhaustive personal fieldwork on its origins and sources of musical, lyrical, and poetic inspiration, as well as its history, geography, and thematic range. The community's social intersectionalities with the political-cultural course of the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic that followed it are also highlighted. As the Âşıks were drawn from different constituent peoples of the Empire, they clearly do not represent a cohesive ethno-musical phenomenon. For our purpose, which is to understand the historical and geographic structure – spaces, landscapes, and places – of musical creation and performance as acts of inclusion and/or exclusion, Korovinis' study of the Âşıks provides an extraordinary opportunity for capturing and analyzing the co-constructive relationship between a folk musical culture and a Westernizing and modernizing Empire, which linked the Ottoman hinterland to big cities of the Empire, and especially to Istanbul.

The story of the Âşıks lays bare many of the social-geographic stressors that had transformed both city and country since the opening of the Empire to the West in 1838 under the auspices of the liberal economic Anglo-Ottoman Treaty of Balta Limani. Their

musical and poetic creations became anchored to "the urban" in the form of Âşık Cafés, and in the context of their mobility that linked hinterland to city. Their marginal social status and the critical character of at least some of their work contributed to power plays between tradition and modernity, Empire and Republic, and a sharply socially polarized world – all of which shaped their call to social justice. For geographers, the sense of intimacy and interiority of the poems' content – be they about love and adoration of another, death and loss, or pain and defeat – stands in stark contrast to the expansive peripatetic culture of their creator-performers, which linked the most remote ends of the Empire, and ultimately the State, to its most cosmopolitan city – Istanbul. By the 1960s, Âşık culture would become one of the voices of resistance to the authoritarian character of the Republic. Shuttling between marginality and victimization (on the one hand) and public adoration and attention from intellectuals (on the other), in late modernity, at least some Âşıks were eventually drawn into and normalized by the commodification of their music.

The classic Âşık Café of the 19th century, as space of inclusion sequestered from a modernizing "urban" and shielded from the gaze of the state, no longer exists. Café spaces that provide repose, diversion, and cultural expression to the public that still embodies Âşık songs are now implicated in (more) complex circuits of capital, regulation, advertising, and pressure from both national and international cultural trends that have reconfigured them into entertainment spaces that cater to multiple publics and musics. Yet the Âşık poetic-musical folk culture remains a remarkable expression of imperial and post-imperial cultural production. It persists into the era of globalization and in some sense flourishes both in its classic, historic forms and as a foundation for a broad range of hybrid genres (some integrating Western motifs). Aşik culture can still be found in such diverse locations as the neighborhood sidewalk, Istanbul clubs, the tourist circuit, rural Anatolia, and in electronic media.

This chapter draws widely from Thomas Korovinis' important ethnographic study titled Οι Ασικιδες. Εισαγωγη και ανθολογια της

Figure 1: Cassette cover of compilation of original songs by the most important Âşıks of the day (Korovinis, 2003: 138)

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Τουρκικης λαικης ποιησης απο τον 13° αιωνα μεχρι σημερα [The Âşıks. An Introduction and Anthology of Turkish Folk Poetry from the 13th Century to the Present, 2nd edition, Athens: Agra Publishers, 2003]. As the title suggests, the work combines an analytical cover section and an extensive anthology of Âşık poetry and songs. The extensive excerpt below loosely follows the narrative arc of Korovinis' analytical section and integrates a small number of poem-songs from the anthology. For purposes of clarity, narrative flow, and leanness of argument, we have relegated some content to footnotes, intervened in the narrative with square-bracketed comments when necessary,

and integrated a small number of illustrations within the narrative where they provide insight. Though not a conventional academic study, Korovinis' work is distinguished by its meticulous compilation and description of cultural artifacts. We also include his detailed typologies of types and themes of Âşık poem-songs, which represent fertile ground for future cultural geographic analysis.

The Art of Âşıks: Connections

An *Âşık* is the itinerant folk artist of the Turkish East [or Eastern Anatolia]. Blending the qualities of musician, poet, and singer, he interprets songs born in the musical traditional milieu, or, on the basis of that tradition, he improvises new ones. An *Âşık's* inseparable companion in his small and his big tours is the *saz*, a stringed folk musical instrument, with which he performs his compositions.

Earlier names of the *Âşık* were *Ozan* or *Halk Şairi*, as in *folk poet*. Even earlier, they were called *Oyun* and *Baksi*. Some *Âşıks* did not play the *saz* but they simply wrote folk poems. This small category was called *Kalem şuari*, while the others, who both wrote poems but also played the *saz*, were called *Saz şairi*. For example, *Bayburutlu Zihni* falls into the first category, while *Erzurumlu Emrah* into the second.

The dominant instrument of Turkish folk music and the only instrument played by the authentic *Âşıks* is the *saz*.[1] The *saz* is one with the *Âşık's* soul. The indissoluble bond between the *Âşıks* and the *saz* is revealed in old Turkish proverbs such as: "people in love have their whimsicalities and the *Âşık* has his *saz*"; "a bald man fears what

1 | The *Âşıks* commonly used the Divan sazi (also known as the *Âşık* sazi). It has a large, deep rounded body and a long neck of approximately 70 centimeters. Overall its length can exceed 120 centimeters. It has 12 strings and 30 frets. The above specifications define the canonical string saz, which is the one most widely used. The fullness of its sound evokes the sound of a 15-piece orchestra.

might happen to his head, but the *Âşık* fears what might happen to his *saz*". In the Turkish language, the *saz* connotes "music," "instrument," "rhythm," and "melody."

An *Âşık* in the Turkish language is the lover, the man who is in love, a person who is madly passionate with something in life. *Âşık* implies love broadly defined: the love of the *Âşıks* is not limited to the idealized, emotional or sensual aspect of the erotic phenomenon; it is, rather, love of and for nature, for life freed from stricture, for justice, and for universality.[2]

The key elements of the artistic composition of *Âşıks* are the harmonious correlation between poem and melody and the utmost respect of the *makam*, that is, the traditional system of Turkish melody types. At times, a musical composition could be played without voice and song or it could accompany the recitation of a poem. According to the folklorist Mahmut Gazimihal, the *Âşıks* have a remarkable natural sense of harmonic tones.

2 | In the Turkish language, the word Âşık is used with the following meanings: 1. The term Âşık marks those creators of the genre of folk and traditional origin as distinguished from the artists deriving from religious and scholarly traditions. Per the traditional religious status, as defined by Vassilis Dimitriadis: "The Âşık holds the lower rank in the hierarchy of the Bektashi Order. It signifies a person who has been admitted to the Order, but he has not yet become a full member." 2. The term Âşık, in a laudatory sense, is also used to draw distinctions between the folk art of the Âşıks and contemporary folklore art modes and the music schools that were variously influenced by, and integrated Arab-Byzantine and later Western and new-Arab influences (arabesque/arabesk music). In some cases today these last have become producers of Eastern-mix pop music, sung in a saccharine manner, accompanied with music bands playing Western and oriental instruments, with exclusive theme a fascicle erotic sentimentality: an unfortunate marriage of quality traditional music with the bankrupt artistic standards of our times. 3. The term is also used to characterize or praise a young "Casanova", or a man who is deeply in love. 4. Also used as an emotional expression that addresses a very close friend, a soul mate.

The phenomenon of a cohesive artistic creation is to be found here: a song is set to music; it is performed and interpreted either in a traditional or modern mode, always founded, on traditional art form. The creator, interpreter and performer are the same person: the *Âşık*.

It is easy but also a little fraught to suggest that artistic affinity exists between the *Âşıks* of the East and the pre-Homeric rhapsody-singers or the medieval troubadours, since the *Âşıks* are unique and atypical cases of musicians, cultivated in other places, in other times, and under different conditions. They could also be associated with a type of Roma melody makers, who represent a corresponding integrative creative phenomenon, and, why not, with the Cretan lyre players and singers, successors and innovators of the Cretan folk song *(mantinada)*. The *Âşıks* also share characteristics with some of the authentic and original *rembetes* (from the Greek term *Rembetico* [or *Rembetika*], a kind of marginalized urban Greek music of the 20th century), with the main difference being that the latter were not travelers. Markos Vamvakaris serves as an example, in the sense that he cross-fertilized his songs and music, sometimes successfully, sometimes awkwardly, with various elements of folk song. He was considered for a long time to be a popular songwriter, who successfully triangulated the competencies of composer, poet, and performer of his own songs.[3]

3 | The word *Âşık* or *Aşıkis* (Ασικης, in Greek) is used in the Greek and Turkish languages to describe a handsome man, full of erotic passion – an attractive, gracious, fine man. This was the definition given to the word by the Greek refugees, so in our times it is used to describe the young man in love. Along with the word Asikis, numerous other words have survived in Greek – words that describe certain male characteristics or attributes. It should be noted that the word Asikis has a female form in Greek: the word Asikissa, used to describe a woman of deep feeling, a woman who suffers from unrequited love, while there is no female form in the Turkish language. Finally, we should not fail to mention that the word Asikis gave the impetus to form beautiful love phrases in Greek, e.g. "Go, young lady, for a walk, your

There is no accurate evidence on the origins of the *Âşıks*. [...] [F]olk literature *(Halk Edebiyati)*, which is also called erotic-lyrical literature *(Âşık Edebiyati)*, because of the subject-matter of its works. Its original roots are can be traced to the 12th century. [It] includes, on the one hand, the entire literary production that reflects the memory of the people, encoded and preserved in a living folk language (also called oral traditional literature). On the other hand, it is composed of the entire transcribed folk literary production, encompassing tales, legends, fairy tales, proverbs, riddles, and the folk poetry of the *Âşıks*.

The *Âşıks* came from the lower classes – the poorest and most uneducated ones. At the same time, they inhabited a world rich in emotion and full of reverie.[4] They came from a world that was free, loosely regulated, and almost atheistic, in the sense that it was free of social and religious prejudices and conventions, while preserving various elements of the pro-Islamic shamanistic religion in its tradition – elements of magic, libertinism, and universality.

The *Âşıks* appear to originate mainly from the villages of Central and Southeastern Turkey, Persia, and Iraq. In the 18th century, they began to be welcomed in towns and cities, gradually congregating in urban areas. They maintained their artistic roots in the broader folk poetry tradition of the East, in the tradition of the folk song, and that of mountainous regions. They relied mainly on rural traditions, on the inspired night feasts of nomads and the lengthy sad songs of the caravans *(uzun hava)*, in which the musical passion of the original

Asikis is passing by", "Somebody with the appearance and the moustache of an Asikis is passing by" etc.

4 | In a number of Turkish proverbs or songs, *Âşıks* are said to be blind. This folk belief has two interpretations: On the one hand, a man is blind because of love, and on the other, as a folk singer, the *Âşık* was, indeed, blind. In the latter case the interpretation follows the legendary tradition whereby the *Âşık* is blind, like the legendary *Âşık* Veysel. Here is a related proverb that has survived to our days: *"The Âşık thinks that the whole world is blind like him"; "If you are an Âşık, you must be blind"*.

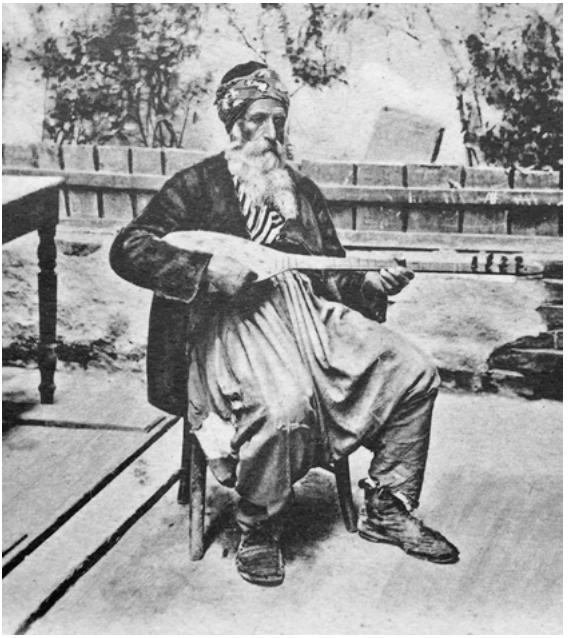
artist met the sounds of nature and the wilderness. Over time, the singers and the *saz* players expressed themselves in a unique, and at the same time, personal way of traditional instrumental and interpretive performance.

The folk poets of the Ottoman Empire remained for centuries obscure or marginalized, limited by the omnipotence of the religious *Tasavvuf* and the scholarly *Divan* literature. While they were considered to be wise men, pure souls, and the genuine expression of the people's spirit, the rulers feared them, because their lyrics expressed strong social concern and criticized harshly those in power. They often engaged in critical sarcasm against the theocracy of the imams; they challenged prejudices; and they mocked the arbitrariness of the law. From the 15th century to date, popular and religious literatures have interacted with each other and they have developed in parallel and, partly, in combination.

While tradition served as the exclusive source of folk literature, it is considered that the religious milieu also contributed to folk literature until the 16th century. From that point onwards, the *Âşıks* stayed away from religious affairs. On the contrary, some important folk and religious poets, such as Yunus Emre and Kaygusuz Abdal, dedicated themselves to religious poetry, distancing themselves from folk poets.

In time the *Âşıks'* cultural significance was acknowledged by urban dwellers, especially intellectuals. Paradoxically, perhaps, they were appreciated only so much for the importance of their music, their performances of it, or for their embracing the *saz* – a symbol of the folk soul, which was, in turn, disdained by urban elites. Instead the intellectuals' high esteem was for the poetic power of the '*Âşıks'* lyrics and songwriting. With the recognition and appreciation of the works of Karacaoğlan, considered to be the most important and popular folk poet of the Ottoman Empire, the songbook of the *Âşıks* gained a special place in Turkish literature.

Figure 2: Elderly Âşık with his saz (postcard, early 20th century) (Korovinis 2003: book cover image)



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Poets of Towns and Cities and Poets from the Provinces

Âşıks lived in both small towns and large cities and were active, at a time – the late 17th century – when the value of folk poetry began to be recognized by elites. At that time, they set up *Âşıks Cafés*, which were still in use in the early 20th century. These poets might be seen as inferior to and less authentic than their provincial counterparts, since they sang for, and enjoyed the patronage of aristocrats. They sometimes lived alongside wealthy families or catered to the sultan's seraglios, often assuming the position of court poet. In such cases,

the only contact they had with ordinary people was at the *Âşıks Cafés*. *Âşıks* expressed a keen interest in incorporating folk poetry into high culture. By borrowing Arab and Persian musical and lyrical idioms, as well as the language and stylistic elements of *Divan* poetry, they would tinker with scholarly poetry and imitate it, often without great success. The most important poets in this category are *Âşıks* Omer and Nadeem. The major obstacle in tracing the authenticity or the ownership of the works of provincial poets is the habit of frequent and iterative copying – a very common practice in those circles. Exactly the same poem would be included, for example, in a collection of *Gevheri*, while it may also be found elsewhere signed this time by Omer. Hence, following the trace to the original author of a poem would not be an easy task.

The Oral Tradition

Most *Âşıks* could not read and write. That was true of those who lived in the past and those others in more recent times. They transmitted the folk songs verbally, performing them by heart. Besides, they improvised, drawing inspiration from traditional poetic and musical motifs, thus creating and reproducing works that had little to do with the original form of the poem and melody.

Âşıks wrote, sang, and transmitted their own poems [which could be characterized as 'poem-songs']. They also circulated earlier songs, by slightly altering their lyrics. Or they composed new music on the basis of traditional cadences and with traditional poetic content. They – along with their public – played a critical role in the development and the dissemination of folk music and poetry, thus becoming the main catalysts for the cultivation of folk literature.

Narrative Sources

Âşıks who were literate, as well as intellectuals who built and curated collections of folk poems, only included the songs they loved the most in their collections. Therefore, the poems that survive to our day were the ones that were either, luckily, included in collections or written down in so-called *cönk* songbook compilations, kept by some folk poets. The *cönk* took the form of large, leather-bound volumes; a great deal of folk poetry was preserved in their pages. The writer-compilers would sometimes classify a poem as traditional or anonymous; sometimes they would attribute it to some other older or contemporary folk poet; and sometimes they would write down their own original poems. [...] *Âşıks* would often write poems, the authorship of which they would subsequently obscure out of concern for the reaction their fantastical and hyperbolic lyrics might cause. In some other cases they would admit to their authorship at a later date. When they wished to cast their name into oblivion, they would take great care to feature the poem as anonymous. For example, during the second Ottoman siege of Baghdad, a popular heroic poem in honor of a brave warrior, known as "the song of the young Osman", was for years thought to be by an anonymous.

Themes of Âşık Folk Poetry

Güzelleme are lyric poems that describe episodes from the erotic love life of the *Âşıks*. The *Âşık* is either in love with a girl, who is in turn in love with him, and to whom he has the desire to dedicate poems, or his love is unrequited and he grieves in despair. He usually tries to move his beloved by playing her beautiful songs on his saz, or tragically narrating his erotic torment, which he believes would drive him to the grave. More often than not, his beloved girl is a figment of his imagination, endowed with all sorts of fabulous, fantastical attributes. Punch-drunk with "the wine of love" *(aşk badesi)*, he indulges in endlessly sermonizing and exalting his object

of desire, to such an extent that he falls into a vortex of classic clichés and stock expressions of love and flirtation. However, Güzelleme, especially those of Karacaoğlan, have beautiful lyrical verses and strong passion, especially when they build on the tyranny and loneliness of unrequited erotic want of the itinerant Âşıks.

Taşlama is poetry written with objects jesting, critiquing, or maligning. The satire is usually acerbic and directed against the grocer who cheats the customer, the corrupt *Aga* who demands payoffs, the *Beγ* (civilian or military officer of the Ottoman Empire) who refuses to pay his debts, the *Hodja* (Islamic preacher or schoolmaster) who turns away from his faith, the official who exploits peasants, the cruel tax collector, the disrespectful policeman, the judge who cultivates the *rüşvet* (bribe). Such acts become the *Âşık's* pretext for pointing a finger to injustice, directing sarcasm at his "betters", and poking fun at his oppressors. Such bold satire produces liberatory feelings among tormented people, who ordinarily lack the power of, or are unaccustomed to, standing up for their rights.

The *Taşlama* repertory lays bare the deficiencies in Ottoman administration. These narratives rose to the level of political denunciation. When people heard sarcastic and caustic words about power, they could claim that "these must be the words of an *Âşık*". It was no wonder several folk poets were persecuted and suffered great hardships as a result of their boldness, indiscretion, and rebelliousness.

Ağitlar is type of song that resembles the elegies, dirges, and lamentations invoking "Death and the underworld" in the Greek folk song canon. *Ağitlar* songs were created and sung for and about the dead. The custom of mourning the dead with songs is traced to early Turkish societies in Central Asia. This custom survives to our times in Eastern, Central, and South Anatolia. If someone visited the house of a recently deceased person during the mourning period, they would observe that relatives and friends expressed their grief in song, in some cases under a performative guise. Such laments emanated out of the anonymous masses – the fount of poetic invention, in this case. Folk poets sang such dirge songs, but not in

remembrance of any ordinary person. Rather, they were typically moved and inspired by the death of a hero, of a brave young man who died tragically, of a young man who had just gotten married, or of a virgin. They also used to call *Ağitlar* poems that were written on the occasion of a great calamity, a natural disaster or to mark somebody's illness. In earlier times, it was common to commission and compensate a poet to compose a lament. In this case, of course, the poet's muse was not authentic; it was rather a perfunctory and contrived affair.

Koçaklama poems praised courage and bravery. Most are creations of Janissary poets or the famous folk poets Dadaloğlu and Köroğlu. In Köroğlu works, the legendary poet himself costars with his misfit gang. They beat people, barricade the roads, kidnap girls, and generally run wild. The *Koçaklama* can be related to the genre of heroic *Destan* poems.

Destan poetic works often map onto epic poems. They have a narrative quality and lionize either fabulous or actual accomplishments of heroes and warriors, or the victories of great ancestors. Their themes border on the legendary. They constitute the favorite artistic genre of Janissary war poets.

Muamma: Folk poets wrote poems in the form of riddles, which they called *muamma*, a name borrowed from *Divan* literature. This genre flourished in *Âşıks Cafès* in the course of poetry contests. An *Âşık* would be forced to concede defeat and recognize as his better the poet who posed an unsolvable question in a more elegant and witty way or contrived an insightful and poetic solution to a question. The literary value of the *muamma* might not all that important, since it was composed on the fly improvisationally, and had witticism as its core objective. These clever riddles differ from the classic folk riddles, which constitute an autonomous and important field of traditional Turkish folklore.

Nasihat poems were written with the view to teaching or propagandizing an idea. They are also called advice-giving poems (öğretici şiirler). The issue is that they incorporate excerpts or even entire

chapters from the teachings of sage ancestors or dervishes, as well as proverbs. Thus, they often sound contrived, and overly solemn.[5]

Folk Poetry Themes

Âşıks were inspired by a variety of personal and social issues, including the following: *Love*, which is the most favored theme of Turkish poetry, whatever the genre of poetry cultivated. The pain deriving from love and erotic idealization is the favorite themes of *Divan* poetry. In this genre the poet or the hero tries to achieve union with the loved one (platonic love), while overcoming countless barriers. In *Tasavvuf* religious poetry, God lays behind the erotic ideal and the poet struggles in vain to gradually accomplish union with Him (divine love). In folk poetry, love is displayed in its entire idealistic and materialistic splendor: from erotic devastation to the enjoyment of erotic success; from the simple and honest love to erotic perfection; and from absolute refusal to the triumph of love:

> Such was the fire of love
> That my face changed;
> I was baptized in her ashes
> Only to serve her.
> *Yunus Emre*

5 | Finally, scholars also distinguish types of folk poetry with respect to the meter and the number of verses: *Türkü* compositions, which are usually anonymous, are based on meters with seven, eight or eleven syllables. The *türkü* consists of a rhyming triplet, called *hane* and a rhyming couplet or a single verse called *kavuştak*. The poetic body of the *mani* is completed in a single quatrain. All verses rhyme, with the exception of the third one, which is rhyme-free. The *koşma* consists of several quatrains with verses of eleven syllables (hendecasyllable).

Mingle with my soul, flame of love,
To set me on fire and turn me into a flame;
Twelve seas will not be able
To put out this very fire of mine.
Yunus Emre

The power of *Âşık* poetic art finds its perfect expression in the legendary folk poem of the *Âşıks* Kerem and Asli, in which the hero, in order to unfasten the dress of his beloved Asli, uses his powerful verses. Each verse serves to undo one button.

Death, as a prevalent poetic theme, is dealt with both from a metaphysical and a materialistic-nihilistic point of view. The human soul is imprisoned in a welcoming body, which is perishable and transient through this world:

At the inn of the world it rests;
The soul flies away, it cannot bear to be caged.
Âşık Veysel

A third thematic group refers to *Nature and life in nature*, which is described with figurative illustration drawn from the physical environment. The genre focuses on imagery of forests, rivers, and particularly mountains:

Huge mountains, erect against us,
Your passes throw up snow,
They cannot tell summer from winter,
Your winds are mercilessly blowing.
Âşık Celali

Foreign lands and nostalgia are also a source of inspiration. The life of the *Âşıks* was interwoven with endless meandering in the Anatolia or in the various lands conquered by the Ottoman Empire. The sorrows of the émigrés and the desire to return to their home-

lands, the nostalgia for their beloved ones and their hometowns are familiar tropes to all folk poets:

> Foreign lands and separation have become a torment;
> See, in the plank of love, the hole, the hole remains;
> The solitary sage lives like a stranger in a foreign land;
> Keep on walking, friend, alone, no brother is to be found.
> *Pir Sultan Abdal*

Friendship is praised in poems as one of the highest ideals. When a master's act of injustice would elicit "a sea of tears," the friend is the perfect shelter. In contrast, the betrayal of friendship is a devastating event, which radically undermines one's faith in humanity:

> If you seek news from friends,
> There is no selfishness in friendship;
> And it feels as though he's not alive,
> He who spends his life friendless.
> *Yunus Emre*

Âşıks write about *humility* derived from their respect for people, from self-esteem, but also from their simple and spiritually-rich way of life:

> I am Karacaoğlan, the humble,
> My head bends to the earth from grief.
> *Karacaoğlan*

It is noteworthy that Turkish traditional poets, especially folk poets, would customarily identify themselves in the body of poems. They would usually mention their names in the last verse of the poem and very occasionally at the end of each turn. The name of the poet is often accompanied by an adjective, which reveals the state of mind and the modesty of the poet: miserable, humiliated, humble, bewildered, poor, abandoned, unhappy, slave of God, servant of the people, a slave of love:

I am humiliated, Yunus,
A wound from head to toe.
Yunus Emre

Religion was one more important muse. *Âşıks* are considered by the public to be venerable and almost prophetic in their insight. [It is notable that most *Âşıks* were of the Alevi faith].

Heroism and gallantry are characteristic traits of the ideal man in traditional societies of the East. A champion or a hero is the man who maintains his moral rectitude in society, is brave at war, and capable of enduring hardship:

I am Dadaloğlu; Tomorrow I go to battle;
Brave men are accustomed to sleeping on the ground.
Dadaloğlu

Last but not least, social life and the problems deriving from it have alimented *Âşık* poetry. *Âşıks* are all too familiar with the lives of privation and marginality that ordinary herdsmen and ragtag nomads lived. The *Âşık* identifies with them and their problems, expressing, when he dares, their complaints and the social protestations of those poor people. He stands up against monstrous Ottoman power and, using his poetry as a weapon, he condemns the rulers and their errors, he holds judges accountable for their acts of injustice, and tax collectors for their misconduct. The *Âşıks* who confronted power were punished by imprisonment or death. A poem states that the songs of the *Âşıks* enchant the nightingales and all birds, but beware the ruler who would be their target:

Kocabasi and Chief Justice,
The bread you eat is ill earned;
You preach faith, but you are not faithful,
You pass laws, but you traffic on nothing but lies.
Pir Sultan Abdal

The Âşıks' Cafés

In the early 17th century, the rise of the main urban centers of the Empire (Istanbul, Izmir, Bursa, Diyarbakir, Adana, Erzurum et al) attracted intellectuals who sought the conditions, and created the circumstances under which they could cultivate and spread their work and establish themselves. The *Âşıks* founded so-called *Âşıks Cafés,* where they would hold musical and poetic contests for their *Âşık* constituency. These gave exposure to the biggest talents and designated the "Chief Poet." A culturally evocative and poetic atmosphere prevailed in the *Cafés* and the candidate folk poets demonstrated genuine passion for fair competition. The *Âşıks Cafés* reached their heyday in the late 18th century, and subsequently declined in the first decades of the 20th century, under the onslaught of Westernization and Europeanization of the Turkish Republic.

In the era of the Sultans Abdülmecid (1839–1861) and Abdülaziz (1861–1876) *Âşıks* coming from the *Café* milieu would be invited to court; around thirty would take residence in the seraglio. When eventually the *Âşıks Cafés* closed down, they were replaced by "music *Cafés*." Some *Âşıks* retained characteristics and behaviors from the era of the cafés, while others – [now urbanized] – also worked as *tulumbaji* (firefighters). They abandoned the *saz* to form music bands playing instruments such as the *klarnet*, the *çiğirtma*, the *çifte dara*, the *tarbuka* (or *darbuka*) and the *zilia*.

In the music *Cafés* they played music all the nights of the Ramadan and all Friday nights in the winter. They established the *sahne* (music stage) and thus transforming the *Cafés* into music halls. Music and poetry contests, similar to the ones that took place formerly at *Âşıks Cafés,* were organized until recently in towns and villages of Anatolia. Nowadays, such events are only organized on a rare basis. The most important ones are the *Âşıks Celebrations* (Aşıklar Söleni) and the *Âşıks Nights (Aşıklar Geceleri)*. Similar events, but with a religious character and in a folkloric style, are

held every summer in Konya, the religious capital of Mevlevi, where dervish dances are performed with musical accompaniment.[6]

As late as 1992 some contemporary music Cafés, like the ones named saz yeri (saz hangouts) still operate in Istanbul, specifically in Beyoğlu, and may be considered vestiges of the Âşıks Cafés tradition.[7] At those Cafés, musicians from the East perform for their friends and they improvise singing beautiful traditional türkü or other songs. They also play songs from Greece or Izmir or traditional songs from the Aegean islands, which they have heard and happen to remember. The saz hangs on the wall, always available to young Âşıks willing to accompany their singing. In the mid-90s there was a trend in Istanbul to convert many old Cafés on Istiklal Avenue (Istiklâl caddesi) to folk taverns and shops, where traditional folk music orchestras, with the saz as the main instrument, presented programs rich with original, traditional oriental songs and the music of the Âşıks.[8]

6 | The virtuosity of the *Âşıks* can be highlighted in the following episode: in the East, two prospective *Âşık* grooms competed for a bride, but both candidates proved to be excellent musicians and poets. Since they were regarded as equally skilled, the bride was left without a groom. This custom was common in areas where a woman's worth was beauty or, mostly, dowry. So, the groom was required to prove his worth by exhibiting talent: *dayi* (being brave and flagrant), in singing, or in virtuosity while playing a musical instrument.

7 | Since the first publication of Korovinis' book, gentrification has been transforming Beyoğlu at a rapid pace, displacing of low-rent entertainment venues, like *Âşıks Cafés,* to more marginalized neighborhoods. Yildirim's work on Sulukule in this volume is illustrative of the pervasive impact of urban renewal *qua* gentrification in parts of the city where poverty and the absence of political clout result in displacement.

8 | Korovinis' use of the term "oriental" does not refer to critical discourses on that term (Saïd, et al). He employs it in the Greek colloquial sense that denotes, rather than connotes, West Asia and parts of North Africa.

The Last of the Original Âşıks and how They Were Treated

In the big cities of the Ottoman Empire, and later of the republican state, the folk songs of the East faced obstacles to dissemination and establishment. This was the case especially in Istanbul, where, besides other musical genres, a local type of folk song had emerged – a reflection of a European Turkey – the song of *Roumeli* (the land of the Romans *qua* Greeks, in this context), called *Rumeli turküsü*. It was enriched by many elements drawn from the strong musical tradition of the Greeks and in particular the *hasapiko* of Tatavla. In Izmir, musical traditions of Asia Minor dominated for a long time both folk and popular [demotic] songs – those which could be described as Orientalized Greek songs as well as the local *Zeybek* songs. But the most important reason why the folk songs were limited to the rural areas, the province, and the Turkish hinterland, was their contradictions to the urban songs. More generally, it was the victim of the conflict of folk culture with the intellectual and artistic traditions of the aristocracy.

The European pretensions of the Ottoman petty-bourgeoisie and the musical tastes of the younger generation shaped a mentality that saw the *şarkli* (a man from the East) as poor, filthy, and illiterate, and, above all, an outmoded domestic commodity, insulting to the new European sensibilities. This public became indifferent to the *Âşıks*, whether they remained traditional or adapted to modernity. That was so even when they submitted to technological change and redeveloped the *saz* into an electric instrument and introduced it to big orchestras. [Some *Âşıks* would join the mainstream] responding to demands of the tourism industry for large ensembles that played oriental music repertory. Or they would lend their sound to creating an atmosphere of a particular musical coloration, in haunts and nightclubs of big cities, signaling in this manner a decay that has parallels to the commodification our own *bouzouki* music [in Greece]. The *Âşıks*, to Westernized Turks, were an artistic reflection

of the rural, of the countryside, at home in the depths of Anatolia and in the Kurdish provinces.

In Istanbul, for as long as the traditions of the *Istanbul efendileri* (the aristocracy) dominated, the *Âşıks* lived on the margins like pariahs, only daring to mutter their songs timidly. Today they survive as picturesque relics of a traditional musical culture who have found themselves, under the pressure of internal migration currents of the last decades, marginalized and living in the poorest neighborhoods of the great metropolis. "These *kiro* have spoiled Beyoğlu." Reminiscing about the glorious past of cosmopolitan Beyoğlu, Turks, Greeks, and foreigners blame *Kiro* for the perceived loss. *Kiro* means "peasant", "uncouth", "uncivilized," a word, which is probably derived from the Turkish word *kir* (plain, wasteland, fallow land). No relationship to the Kurds, *Kiro* describes in one word all the poor emigrants from Eastern Turkey. As such, they are held responsible for the seductive decadence of Beyoğlu's nightlife, which in our times, alongside the homeless, panhandlers, and the uncared-for disabled, is home to a big part of Istanbul's demimonde, characterized by spaces of vagrancy, eros-for-sale for all tastes, and dive bars and night clubs.

Âşık Adil Ali Atalan's poem-song *Anatolia* tells of that story of flight, alienation, and nostalgia in this verse from his poem-song titled "Anatolia":

Anatolia, you're angry with us, you send us away;
We look for factories jobs and trades;
Foreign lands nurse your people;
My Anatolia, my Anatolia.

The "Artful Song" and the Istanbul Folk Song in the Current Era

Korovinis refer here to the "artful song" (Greek: "εντεχνο") or "artfully composed" song that might be inspired by folk and popular music (such as the music of the Âşıks, the Zeybeks, or the rembetes). In contrast to these organic, fluid, and often improvisational genres, the "artful" song is a byproduct of 20th century urban culture, it is composed by an identifiable composer, employs formal musical language, is written down (as opposed to transmitted through an oral tradition) and thereby becomes fixed in lyrical and melodic senses that allows its performance in its original version as opposed to its organic and improvisational performance.

In the Turkish Republican era, starting in 1926, the *Darul-Elhan* foundation launched a great initiative for the systematic collection, curating, and valorization of traditional musical heritage. In the period 1927–29, the Foundation, in cooperation with the Istanbul Conservatory, made available 850 folk song compositions. In 1936, the Turkish composer Adnan Saygun, in collaboration with the Hungarian composer Béla Bartók and with the participation of Ulvi Cemal Erkin, Necil Kazim Akses, and Ali Riza Yalçin, composed more than a hundred folk songs. The Conservatory of Ankara, founded in 1936, organized research missions, which collected more than 10,000 folk songs from every village and town in Turkey. [...]

Starting in 1937, the establishment of a network of radio stations [and the launching of Radio Ankara in 1938] helped extend the reach of folk music. In 1960 a military coup deposed the Menderes Government and imposed a brutal dictatorship. In 1963 the Labor Party rose and folk culture came into fashion. Marching folk musicians performing folk songs of the 15th and the 16th century preceded workers' demonstrations. The *saz* became a symbol of militant intellectuals, while the Left adopted folk and popular music genres and songs. This phenomenon occurred naturally, since the *Âşıks* had had a long rebellious tradition since the Sultans' times. Further-

more, the social character of folk poems established and rescripted them as protest songs. "The people respect the *Âşık*, while the rulers are beware of the *Âşık*", wrote Abidin Dino, the friend of Nâzim Hikmet. The song titled "Made of the same stuff" by *Âşık* Nesimi Çimen expresses sentiments that are both intensely intimate and at the same time vastly political, especially when they are performed under authoritarian rule:

> You can't tell people apart,
> We may speak different tongues,
> But we are made of the same stuff,
> All folks came out of the same brew,
> We came from different places,
> But we are made of the same stuff.
> Only one can tell people apart,
> He who brought all people equally into existence,
> He made some white, others black, another yellow,
> Our skin colors is different,
> but we are made of the same stuff.
>
> For Nesimi all folks are a true brother,
> This is his principle and his value, my beloved friend and brother,
> Some of us obey the *Hoca*, some the alevi dede, some the monk,
> Our faiths are different
> But we are made of the same stuff.

Around the 1970s, the political exploitation of folk poetry was followed by its commodification. Promoters organized big concerts attended by large audiences, while a lot of the *Âşıks* adapted to the Western celebrity system. They incorporated Western elements to their music; they started playing the electric *saz*; they joined various organizations and political parties, and they developed a type of contemporary folk or folkloric song that drew on the tradition but featured updated content and interpretative techniques. After 1960 we saw elderly opera singers singing folk songs accompanied with

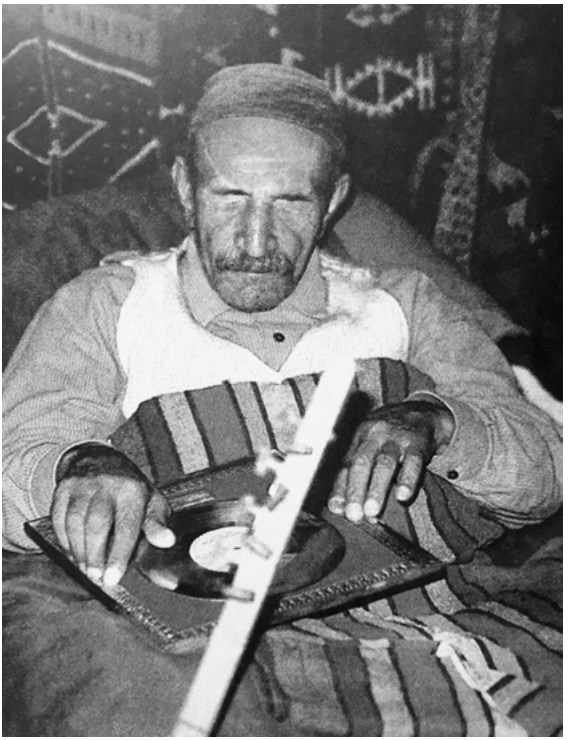
saz, while maintaining, however, the operatic style. Common folk would not embrace these artful hybrids, which were deemed to be perversions of the tradition, but intellectuals did. They particularly loved opera singer Mehmet Ruhi Su's creations. His turn to folk music and his Western music-inspired arrangements and performances of Anatolian folk songs, made him (and folk music) popular at that time, despite his past leftist political views, which had caused him to be banned for years from State Radio.[9] Ruhi Su founded a choir, the *Dostlar Korosu* (Choir of Friends), whose activities extended to the entire East, defending and promoting in his way the value of folk songs.

Âşık Mahsuni Şerif, *Âşık* Ihsani, Arif Sağ, and Feyzullah Çinar were among the great *Âşıks* of the early 1970s who kept performing folk music authentically. The most dynamic and genuine representative of the Turkish folk poetry in the 20th century is considered to be the blind bard *Âşık* Veysel. Other popular contemporary *Âşıks,* who cultivated the traditional modes of the folk song, are Nesimi Çimen, the Kurd troubadour Ali Tenco, who was self-exiled in France, where he sang along with his *tambours*, the Kurdish female singer Gülistan, and the Kurdish bard Şivan Perwer. By 1975 Zülfü Livaneli started cultivating a new wave surrounding folk music, using his *bağlama* and introducing a number of folk musical instruments to folk orchestras. Ahmet Kaya, the idol of the Turkish Left, is the most expressive of the new wave among contemporary *Âşıks*. He combines respect for the traditional song and experiments with fusion of folk and artful compositions.

In spite of folk music's continuing popularity, the Turkish State as well as various parastatal organizations still trouble and interfere with folk artists and their work, especially when their activities are associated with, or in service of, the goals of the Leftist intelligentsia. One of the most tragic events tarnishing the political history of Turkey in recent decades has been the murder of numerous intel-

9 | In 1952 Mehmet Ruhi Su was censured and imprisoned for 5 years for his affiliation with the Communist Party.

Figure 3: Âşık Veysel remains the iconic personality of that poetic-musical tradition. Blind, he embodied the classic iconography and life of the Âşık (Korovinis, 2003: 212)



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lectuals and artists – including that of Nesimi Çimen, one of the most important *Âşıks* of the 20th century. Fanatic members of paramilitary organizations organized that crime, which was carried out by torching a central hotel of Sivas on the 2nd of July 1993, during the celebrations in remembrance of the great folk and religious poet Pir Sultan Abdal.

Conclusion

The Âşık phenomenon is defined by its contradictions. Its socio-spatial polarities address the manner in which Âşık culture is expressive of urban social and political inclusion and exclusion. Âşıks and their poem-songs are exemplary of traditional, folk culture yet adaptive to late modern commodification – especially in the Istanbul entertainment milieu – as well as to technological innovation. The Âşık genre is expressive of an intense emotional interiority, yet, though the poem-song medium, it has reached a vast audience (now also electronically). According to folklore, Âşıks are blind, yet they have the ability to see further than most. Importantly, in a case of singing (as opposed to talking) to power, the classic Âşık thematic range of love, death, longing, and heroism, has at times metamorphosed into biting social and political critique, directed at elites and even the highest echelons of government.

Having survived modernization, the collapse of empire, and the establishment of occidentalization as a new norm, Âşıks have navigated the contradictions of the State and survived. They were historically a peripatetic culture yet established a strong place-based presence through the Âşıks Cafés and are now as much an urban phenomenon as a provincial one. Thus, once axiomatically rural and representative of the countryside, the hinterland, and the periphery, they have gravitated to, and catalyzed the urban musical scene. Âşıks have been stereotypically socio-spatially marginalized, yet at times enjoyed the patronage of both local and capital elites, including that of the imperial court.

The enduring connection between Âşık and Alevi/Zakir traditions and performances is not merely artistic and musical but can be expressive of a universalist or communitarian politics of inclusion and a voice against exclusion – both likely unwelcome by any establishment that seeks to control public discourse and monopolize legitimacy. In this sense, Ozdemir's work in this volume is especially relevant and important. Korovinis openly links the Âşık and

Alevi communities in his impassioned condemnation of the 1993 Sivas massacre.

In the late-modern era Âşıks occupy a popular market niche in the world of both live and recorded musical performances. They still captivate audiences of all classes in both tourist and dive bars, and cultural venues in Istanbul. Entertainment capitalism might have blunted the sharper critiques of Âşık performers by mainstreaming and normalizing at least some of them, but the resilience of Âşık culture suggests that it can still play an important role in the critique of the political life and places of the excluded.

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