

Martin Stokes  
Arabesk

## Locality and Hybridity in Turkish Popular Music

*Martin Stokes is Lecturer in Social Anthropology and Ethnomusicology at the Queen's University of Belfast. He is author of «The Arabesk Debate: Music and Musicians in Modern Turkey» (Clarendon 1992) and the Editor of «Ethnicity, Identity and Music: The Musical Construction of Place» (Berg 1994)*

The idea that some musics are pure and others hybrid, that some are culturally legitimate and others illegitimate is a relatively recent phenomenon in Turkey, but one which governs much of the way in which music is understood, practiced and experienced. Questions of purity and hybridity, legitimacy and illegitimacy in relation to certain musical genres throw into sharp focus the issue of transcultural movements, borrowings, migrations, from East to West, and within the Middle East – a fact which is often explicitly and implicitly denied in much nationalist writing in the Middle East. What I am describing is of course true in many Middle Eastern societies which have a shared historical trajectory: post-colonialism and nationalist ideologies have turned the cultural domain into a battleground. Intimate details of everyday life in the Middle East have become the site of struggle between imposed concepts of science, order, rationality, purity, legitimacy etc. imposed by reformist bureaucracies, and that which these concepts have sought to supplant. Everything from dress to nuances of everyday language has become an arena of bitter dispute, subtle indexes of the extent to which one agrees with, opposes, or maintains a nonchalant distance from symbols of «progress», reform, westernisation etc. Music, and particularly popular musics, have, of course, been thoroughly implicated in these processes, as both a focus for cultural control on the part of state bureaucracies and simultaneously as a focus for resistance to that control. Few cultural activities are so public and yet so intensely private: the powerful possibilities for social con-

control that music offers for the dirigiste mind set of many reforming and westernising bureaucracies in the Middle East have seldom been ignored. Institutes of national folk music, radio and television stations, exemplary orchestras and performers have been marshalled in the service of the state around invariable notions of national cultural legitimacy. The focus at which arbitrary forms of state power encounter everyday life is invariably a point of resistance, and we should not be surprised by the fact that counter cultural and oppositional voices have often been explicitly articulated and mobilised in musical performance. The explosive popularity of Cheb Khaled and Algerian Rai throughout the Middle East, and amongst migrant and diaspora Middle Eastern populations in Europe and elsewhere, is a case in point.

The case that I wish to mention today, that of Turkish Arabesk is, in this respect, interesting and instructive. It is impossible not to see in Turkish Arabesk the musical, poetic and filmic representation of values that are highly inimical to the westernising aspirations of the Kemalist bureaucracy. It is also undeniably the case that Arabesk has not become the focus for explicitly oppositional politics, as in the case of, say, the politicised folk song movement of Ewan McColl or Woody Guthrie in Europe and the States, or in the case of rock in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. This can be explained by the explicit moves on the part of Turkish governments in the 1980s to coopt a cultural movement that could, indeed, have become explicitly oppositional. Seen at the most general level, this co-

option reflects the fact that in an age of global industrial and communications structures, the old rhetoric of the nation-state makes little sense. A gap has emerged between the nation-state and the current global political structures, and this in turn has produced a gap between nationally «invented traditions» and forms of popular culture readily accessible by audio cassettes, personal computers, satellite TV, etc. The former look increasingly unpersuasive, not to say absurd. Old nationalist-bureaucratic elites have been forced to adopt different strategies to maintain power, and one of these has been to minimise this gap, to diminish the production of national imagery, and to deal more positively with the proliferation of hybrid popular cultural forms. The problem in Turkey is that many of these «hybrid» forms are matters of immense political sensitivity: most, along with various forms of Islam, have been dismissed by nationalist ideologues from the 1920s-50s as backward and unacceptably Eastern. The other component of these hybrid popular cultural forms has been equally unacceptable to the managers of Turkey's national culture: broadly speaking it is the product of youth-orientated Western music and film industries, with a cultural baggage of hedonism and rebellion, specifically associated by some commentators with the problems of young Turks in Germany. Nonetheless, improbable though it might seem, forms which are the result of a synthesis of precisely these Western and Eastern elements have now become politically respectable.

This has, of course, happened elsewhere. Until recently, the Algerian government had also attempted to coopt voices which they had hitherto excluded as degenerate, hybrid and culturally illegitimate. Algerian Rai was, as it were, decriminalized, with the first officially promoted Rai festival of Oran of 1985. This immediately made Rai, with its celebration of sex, drink and drugs, even less acceptable to the FIS opposition. Only a few weeks ago, another Rai singer, Cheb Hasni, was shot dead by gunmen – in all probability supporters of FIS (who are known to have kidnapped a number of singers). For broadly parallel reasons in Turkey, the civilian governments which succeeded the military in 1983 have adopted a compromising attitude towards popular culture and popular religion. They have claimed a Kemalist line, but in fact they have been highly accommodating to things which Kemalism ex-

PLICITLY rejected – notably the public expression of Islam, but also many things that had come to be seen as unacceptable remnants of Turkey's «Eastern» face.

The political line of the ANAP government of Turgut Özal, which dominated Turkish politics in the 1980s, was one of the promotion of political liberalism and laissez-faire economics. Behind this was, without doubt, a more cynical attitude to the question of law and order, following civil unrest in the late 1970s, the mounting foreign debt situation, and the concerns of Turkey's debtors that the situation had got out of hand. The cooption of popular culture by Özal was a direct move to counter arguments (which had their origin, quite separately, in liberal and Marxian debates in Turkey about the state) that excessive bureaucratic control of the reform process had caused the institutions of civil society to wither; that the two had been oppositional, and had not been working to support one another. Arabesk became an explicit focus for Özal's populist politics, and the object of a remarkable and somewhat comic compromise between the popular cultural domain and the state. The thing which most angers Kemalist intellectuals about Arabesk is its high current of masochistic emotion, its «acı», «pain». In 1987, the Turkish minister of culture and tourism, Mustafa Tinaz' Titiz, convened a conference in Istanbul to discuss the «Arabesk» problem, and to advocate an Arabesk which would be removed of its «acı». The result was an officially promoted «painless Arabesk» – «Acısız Arabesk».

Hakki Bulut and Esin Engin's model piece of painless Arabesk, «Sevenler Kiskanır», enjoyed a brief period of popularity in 1987 for entirely ironic reasons, and then disappeared without trace. However, the Anavatan government had, I believe, succeeded in persuading many people that they were sympathetic to a whole range of liberal causes. The absurdity of «painless Arabesk» was not entirely without consequence, alienating what one might call hard-core fans, whose support for a number of stars who remained remarkably unassimilated by the Özal government, such as Müslüm Gürses, intensified. This was a result, I believe, of the refusal of stars such as Müslüm Gürses to participate in ANAP political rallies along with many big Arabesk names, İbrahim Tatlıses and Emrah, or to join the entourage of Özal and his wife Semrah, as did singers

such as Orhan Gencebay and Bulent Ersoy. Arabesk therefore has not been entirely assimilated: as Meral Özбек points out in her study of Orhan Gencebay, citing Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall, the popular cultural domain of Arabesk is today one of simultaneous coercion and resistance (*hem direnme hem de bir boyun eğme alanıdır*), a viewpoint which conforms neatly to her Gramscian approach to popular culture.

Özбек's study of Orhan Gencebay reflects a certain dismay by intellectuals on the political left with the success of the right in coopting popular culture. Her argument is that the left have to stop criticising popular culture as false consciousness, and to stop supporting chauvinistic notions that arabesk is a hybrid cultural form and therefore has no place in modern Turkey. The left, she argues, has to see Arabesk as something more positive: a vehicle of popular utopianism which articulates, in a highly coded, metaphorical language, a desire for a political system which is based on a «sharing» as opposed to capitalist rationality (*paylaşımçı rasyonalitesi*). It is clear from her interviews with the singer Orhan Gencebay that he had some difficulty agreeing with her political interpretation of his music. However it is clear that both left and right in Turkey are engaged in a highly significant intellectual enterprise – significant, that is to say, when viewed in relation to earlier and entirely negative attitudes towards Arabesk.

These attitudes can be summed up as follows: in the opinion of its critics, Arabesk is a hybrid cultural form which has no legitimacy in Turkey today. For observers of Arabesk on the right of the political spectrum, whose nationalism looks back to and celebrates the Ottoman period, Arabesk is the inevitable result of seventy years of bureaucratic reformism. This reformism explicitly rejected the notion of an Islamic international culture, over which the Ottoman Turks had not only presided, but to which they had made their own distinct contribution. The classical music of urban, Ottoman Turkey was cultivated not only at court, but also amongst the popular religious confraternities, and leisure spaces of the capital dominated by a non-Muslim minority bourgeoisie towards the end of the 19th century. Since the reformist bureaucratic elite of the early republic were in opposition to all of these, Ottoman art music became a particularly powerful symbol of everything that the new republic re-

jected. The closing of the Ottoman art music conservatories in 1926-9, and its continued censure, were considered by its supporters both undemocratic and, ironically, un-nationalistic. Lacking a solid cultural lead, the people, it is argued, turned to Egyptian popular musics in the 1930s and 40s, since they offered at least some kind of continuity, musically speaking, with the past. A great deal of scholarly speculation continues in relation to what Mustafa Kemal Atatürk actually said, and what he had in mind when he was saying it. Supporters of the art music genre, notably Hüseyin Sadettin Arel, and more recently, Yılmaz Öztuna, have conducted their critique on this basis – ie of deference to Mustafa Kemal, but are highly critical of heavy-handed bureaucratic reformism.

Critics of Arabesk on the left such as Ertan Eğribel and Nazife Güngör also deplore the hybrid origins of Arabesk, along with its sentimentalism and fatalism, and similarly find the source of its popularity in misdirected bureaucratic reformism. Here, however, they argue that turning away from the Ottoman legacy was in itself a good thing, but the reformist elites did so in a manner that was insensitive to the practical and cultural needs of the people. This critique is based on the idea that the new republic was better at tearing the old order down than at replacing it with a viable alternative. It is precisely this culture of «lack-of-alternatives» (*alternatifsizlik*) identified by the sociologist Ertan Eğribel that generated Arabesk, along with a number of other «social problems». In particular, transport infrastructure problems in Istanbul have become acute over the last two decades. This in turn relates to the continued development of squatter-towns around the peripheries of all large industrial cities; in particular Istanbul, in the wake of laissez-faire economics and a lack of political commitment to sort the problem out. The link between the squatter-towns, the transport infrastructure and Arabesk has been so strong that Arabesk continues to be associated with the *dolmuş* – a kind of privately run shared taxi or minibus which connects the squatter town to the city center. Arabesk has been jokingly known as *dolmuş* music – a perfect symbol of a kind of meandering vitality, of a rapid but directionless mobility which summarised, for critics, the politics of the Özal years.

Özбек's study, which is explicitly situated in a kind of new left intellectual project, corresponds to a new juncture in the response to Arabesk by Turkey's intelligentsia and the state. Her conclusion, that a musical form can and should be seen as a simultaneous moment of resistance and coercion, leaves me in some doubt. I sympathise, broadly with her Gramscian politics, and the fact that we must not dismiss popular culture from elitist standpoints. But there are some specific problems with the analysis, and one of these relates to the question of hybridity and syncretism. Özбек's discussions of Arabesk with Gencebay lead to many conclusions similar to my own discussions with practicing musicians: today there is very little one can point to in it that is demonstrably and purely Arab in origin, and very little that musicians see as being «Arab» in any simple sense. Even if one is to investigate the idea that the borrowing from film music simply lifted Arab tunes and musical ideas from an Arab to a Turkish musical culture, one runs up against the fact that a huge number of Turks were employed in the Arab film industry, as musicians as well as other things. This is not to deny «Arab influence», but to say that that Arab influence itself is hybrid, or, to use a less value-laden term, syncretic, including many Turkish and of course Western European elements.

Secondly, other forms of musical contact are more important to Arabesk musicians than contacts with the Arab world. For Orhan Gencebay, according to Özбек, it was Bach and Elvis, for Mustafa Keser (a lesser known arabesk singer with whom I worked), it was Frank Sinatra and Nat King Cole who provided inspiration. Arabesk instrumentalists inhabit a world of sitars and tablas, bongos, congas, electric guitars, synthesizers and the latest recording technology. The one sound which is held by many musicians to be a *real* borrowing from the Arab popular domain is the chorus of violins, cellos and double-basses. This is somewhat ironic, since the legitimacy in Arab music circles of western violins were being debated furiously in 1932 at the Congress of Arab Music in Cairo.

Music travels easily and lightly, requiring only a memory, and small and generally easily transportable technology. The means of production are dispersed and not concentrated solely in the hands of elite groups. Those musicians who are predisposed towards eclecticism thus do not

have difficulty in locating new ideas – all that is required, for example, is a radio set, and a vast panoply of musics from southern and eastern Europe, and the main Arab musical centers are immediately available. The reverse is true of more material forms of culture, or rather, cultural forms which require a greater capital investment in their basic materials such as architecture. The syncretic components of Arabesk music are seldom commented upon by the writers I have mentioned, except for passing comments that Arab music is not the only element in the mix. This reflects a certain reluctance to discuss the details of the music, or the specificities of musical expression, or the lives and cultural positions of musicians in Turkey. It is indeed true that much recent critical discussion of popular culture tends to ignore the particularities of musical practice: what is going on in and through music is not necessarily identical to that going on elsewhere (for example in the visual arts, literature, architecture, or indeed the formal representations of official politics). A more musicologically sensitive approach is certainly required. I am not yet able to elaborate this, but I will conclude with two brief points concerning the nature of cross-cultural experiences through music.

Firstly, musicians in Turkey have for many centuries been ambiguous figures. Music is at best an ambiguous activity for Muslims, and in Turkey, as elsewhere in the Middle East, it has as a consequence been associated with non-Muslim minorities (much has been written about this). Minority populations in Istanbul, especially following the gradual expansion of European trade networks into the Middle East during the 19th century, have always been culturally inclined to look both East and West, for broad socio-economic reasons. This has also meant that Western European foreigners resident in Istanbul, whether diplomats, spies, tourists, or hostages, have always found a home in Ottoman musical circles. Their influence has been profound, particularly in introducing, slowly and haphazardly, western musical concepts into Turkish musical practice. Around 1650 a Polish palace servant, Ali Ufki Bobowski compiled a collection of songs he heard around him in western musical notation. Later in the 17th century, the Romanian prince, Demetrius Cantemir notated and codified a large body of instrumental music, and became a significant authority on theory and composer in the

art music tradition. From the late 16th century a series of travellers, merchants and diplomats noted the music they heard, and spent time mastering its theory: Charles Fonton's *Essai sur la Musique Orientale* of 1751 is a notable example. My first point is then that the moral ambiguity of music, as far as the religious and political majority were concerned, and the consequent involvement of non-Muslim minorities meant that music was a field dominated by a marginalised but significant group with multiple cultural ties both across the Ottoman Empire and to Europe. This situation pertained before the creation of a mass market for music publishing and later sound recording.

My second point relates to the contemporary period: the mass music market is dominated by two contradictory forces. One is for modernist exotica – a demand which has periodically been satisfied by rock and roll, swing, tango, chanson, flamenco, progressive rock, punk, rap and hip hop – all forms which have been appropriated in one way or another by Turkish popular musicians, within and outside of Arabesk. Many young Turkish people have direct experience of this music through labour migration in Europe,

travel (for the privileged), and experience of Western tourism, or simply watching satellite TV and listening to the radio. The other is an abiding, if continually mutating, demand for «traditional» musics in particular Anatolian folk genres and the Arab music popularised by Umm Kulthum and Farid al-Atrash. To any musicians possessing a cassette recorder and a radio, the musical resources for catering for this mass audience lie immediately at hand. In recent years, lingering official disparagement of music which is not considered «properly Turkish» has been continually undermined by the ready availability of non-Turkish musics. The creative eclecticism of Turkish musicians has always moved a little ahead and outside of state control, whose attempts to construct a national yet modern music have absorbed huge resources. Popular music has always been a problem and a profound threat in Turkey for the ease with which it is able to construct its own East-West trajectories. Whilst the Turkish state has enjoyed limited success in appropriating a once threatening form, Arabesk, it seems likely to me (as a romantic) that in different, even unexpected ways, popular music and its audiences will keep one step ahead.■

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## Tarek Haverić L'Islam et la «Question Bosnienne»

Auteur de nombreux travaux politiques et philosophiques, et actuellement orienté vers la sociologie Tarek Haverić est un spécialiste de la «question bosnienne» pour laquelle il a consacré plusieurs essais.

Les accords de Dayton qui auraient mis fin à la guerre en Bosnie-Herzégovine ne peuvent créer l'illusion d'une «solution juste». Toutefois, ils rendent possible aux démocraties occidentales de considérer comme répréhensible (si elles l'avaient jamais fait) non plus la violation de l'intérieur (insurrection armée) ou de l'extérieur (agression) de l'ordre constitutionnel démocratique d'un pays, mais le refus des conséquences de ces agissements; par les encouragements directs de l'agresseur<sup>1</sup> et la non-assistance à l'agressé, elles ont contraint ce dernier à «accepter» et légaliser par sa signature un état de fait établi par la force (génocide et crimes de guerre), en créant un bien-fondé constitutionnel des sanctions éventuelles contre ceux qui désormais le transgresseraient. Par conséquent, agresseurs et agressés sont juridiquement mis sur pied d'égalité en tant que «parties en conflit» ayant finalement trouvé une solution pour l'intérêt de tous.

L'issue du conflit, la partition de fait de la Bosnie en trois territoires ethniques, a fait que l'on oublie officiellement ses causes. De ce fait s'est trouvé accrédité le slogan de la propagande serbe selon lequel «ces peuples ne peuvent vivre ensemble». Dans la variante la plus radicale du «déterminisme culturel», la présence même de l'Islam en tant que *corpus alienum* est une rai-

son suffisante de la guerre et de la disparition de la Bosnie de toutes les cartes: le projet méticuleusement élaboré de la Grande Serbie (et, par la suite, de la Grande Croatie) est envoyé aux oubliettes. Les leaders d'opinion mondiaux on su mettre à profit l'image générale et déjà existante de l'Islam dans les médias occidentaux, reposant sur le terrorisme, le fanatisme et le retard historique: le problème de la démocratie et du totalitarisme est devenu, en doucement, le problème de l'inconciliabilité des civilisations<sup>2</sup>. Dans cette perspective, l'Islam cesse d'être une composante culturelle de la Bosnie; la Bosnie devient, à son tour, une composante politique en puissance du monde islamique ne pouvant avoir, en tant que telle, sa place en Europe. C'est pourquoi dans la genèse du conflit bosnien, l'usage que l'on a fait de l'Islam est nettement plus important que ne l'a été son vrai rôle.

Les oeuvres de référence<sup>3</sup> soulignent que les Musulmans bosniens<sup>4</sup> sont la population slave

2. L'intérêt suscité en Serbie par le texte de Samuel Huntington, directeur de l'Institut des Études Stratégiques de l'Université Harvard, sur le conflit imminent des civilisations est significatif («The Clash of Civilizations», *Foreign Affairs*, automne 1993). L'interview publié, dans le journal *Evropske novosti* (le 14 janvier 1994) finit par la question du journaliste «que considérez-vous comme le danger majeur?» et la réponse de Huntington: «Cela reste le conflit des civilisations. Vous n'avez qu'à regarder en Europe la carte de l'ex-Yougoslavie et l'ex-URSS: l'Islam et la chrétienté se sont trouvés pris dans un conflit de longue haleine».

3. Paul Garde, *Vie et mort de la Yougoslavie*, Fayard, 1994; Srecko M. Dzaja, *Konfessionalität und Nationalität Bosniens und Herzegovinas. Voremanzipatorische Phase, 1463-1804*, Munich, Oldenbourg, 1984.

4. *Musulmans* (avec une majuscule) était le nom officiel de l'ethnie (changé par la suite en *Bosniaques*), *musulmans* (avec une minuscule) restant l'appellation des croyants de confession islamique.

1. «Il ne faut pas ajouter la guerre à la guerre», la déclaration tristement célèbre de F. Mitterrand, signifiait sans équivoque aux agresseurs serbes que l'Occident n'interviendrait pas militairement en Bosnie. Voir le texte de Patrice Canivez «La France face à la guerre dans l'ex-Yougoslavie» dans *Vukovar, Sarajevo...* (sous la direction de Véronique Nahoum-Grappe), Éditions Esprit, 1993.