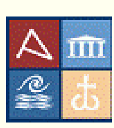

ΙΔΡΥΜΑ ΜΕΙΖΟΝΟΣ ΕΛΛΗΝΙΣΜΟΥ

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Summary :

The division of leisure time in Constantinople (Istanbul) presented distinct differences depending on gender and social stratification. However, in many cases, certain forms of entertainment became a “meeting point” for different social and ethnic-religious groups, as well as a point of communication and source of interaction between “high” and “popular” culture. Within this framework, the coffee-house, the tavern and every kind of spectacle was an integral part.

Date

16th - late 18th century

Geographical Location

Constantinople (Istanbul)

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1. Ottomans and leisure time

We shouldn' t imagine Ottoman Constantinople (Istanbul) as a quiet city disturbed only by the muezzin’s call and the Janissaries’ revolts. Actually, according to the code of ethics of the Ottoman elite, sociability and recreation were totally “acceptable”, provided that they took place in private areas. The Ottomans appear to have placed great importance on leisure time, even though – at least among the elite – they believed it should be spent on study or charity. Foreign travellers mention that the prominent leisure pursuit of a high-ranking Ottoman was to sit in silence and meditate; in accordance with Ottoman literature, dinners, gatherings among friends and poetry recitals were prominent. This perception of time led many Westerners (mainly English or German) to believe that Ottomans were lazy, although Ottoman sources condemned sloth;[1] the German Rauwolff, characteristically, writes at the end of the 16th century that Turks “love sloth more than work, because one can see them spend a whole day playing chess and other games and playing string instruments...”, while a short time later George Sandys points out that they work only occasionally, preferring ease to profit.[2]

2. Sociability and coffee-houses

So, although Islam was thought to frown upon music – an attitude which the fundamentalist movements of the 17th century tried to impose, especially as regards its use by the mystical dervish orders – there were groups of musicians, respected by society, that played music not only at private gatherings, but also at weddings, circumcision ceremonies and big public festivals. Similar kinds of sociability were even more apparent among the lower strata of the urban population, since there wasn't a clear distinction between the public and private spheres. For example, it was often recorded that groups of women met at cemeteries or saints’ tombs in the country. Some of these rural destinations became very popular, like the celebrated Kağıthane at the innermost part of the Golden Horn, where people gathered to eat, entertain themselves with stories and music or talk.

However, the main Ottoman place of recreation and social intercourse is the coffee-shop, maybe the single most distinctive phenomenon of the Ottoman urban social fabric. Coffee was introduced to the Ottoman Empire in 1554/1555 by two Arabs from Syria, who opened up a large establishment in Tahtakale (a part of town well known for the many recreational opportunities it offered), where they sold the particular product. According to the great historian İbrahim Peçevi (Peçuyli İbrahim Efendi, 1577-1649?), individuals “addicted to joy and, especially, many noblemen from the learned classes” frequented the shop, sitting in groups of twenty or thirty people; some reading books, others playing backgammon or chess, and others reciting their poems to the rest. Gradually, the clientele started to include kadis, clerks awaiting their placements, medrese teachers, unemployed and working men not involved in public life. The shop had earned so great a reputation, that even wealthy people started to come; imams, muezzins and members of the dervish orders said that the public was so addicted that the mosques were empty, and in particular, the preachers reacted claiming that coffee-houses were despicable dens and that they were just one step before taverns, and reminding the Islamic prohibition on eating charred food, as roasted coffee was supposed to be. Murad III (1574-1595) ordered a ban on coffee; however, according once again to Peçevi, coffee houses continued to operate illegally under the name “rough” coffee-shops, in tiny dead end streets and in the back rooms of other establishments. Finally, coffee became so popular that the ulemas had to accept its

legal status and, as Peçevi concludes, "now there is no-one left that doesn't drink (coffee), ulemas, sheikhs, viziers and other officials".[3]

In the following years, the coffee-house as a place (not coffee itself) continued to be banned, especially during the rule of sultan Murad IV (1623-1640). These prohibitions were mainly due to the fact that coffee-shops served as fertile ground for political debate, since they were meeting points for people from different social backgrounds, thus threatening both the political and the ideological status quo. This, along with sloth, are the main accusations that writers of the Ottoman elite hurled at the coffee-shop patrons.[4] A characteristic example were the fetvas of the great Ebusuud, sheikulislam (1545 - 1574), who condemns the "licentious freethinkers" assembling at coffee-houses to play backgammon and chess, to entertain themselves with "sinful and beardless youths" and to spread slander.[5] In coffee-houses, apart from conversation of a private or public nature, other activities that characterized the Ottoman attitude towards recreation took place; the difference is that the coffee-shops were frequented by members of the lower classes, since, as Mouradgea d'Ohsson records at the end of the 18th century, members of the elite classes visited them mainly in the countryside, while journeying; and only to have a short rest.[6] Coffee-house patrons played board games like chess and backgammon,[7] while the proprietors often hired musicians, galanty show artists and storytellers (meddah).[8] These last two arts, along with *orta oyunu*, a kind of popular Ottoman theatre, were probably the main forms of everyday entertainment for the urban population, especially during the festive nights of the Ramadan, when the hard daily fasting ended. It is very interesting to note that both shadow theatre shows and meddah stories indicate the level of fusion between "elite" and "popular" culture: firstly, popular art forms included several elements and motifs from the "high" Ottoman literature, while the corresponding artists played not only in the coffee-shops, but were often invited to the palace as well. Similar observations, moreover, can be made regarding the production of elite literature, especially poetry. Poetry was difficult for most people to understand, because of the many Arab and Persian elements of the language and the sophistication of the metaphors. However, it appealed to more popular audiences, something indicated by the fact that elements of it appearing in popular art forms (fables, urban songs), but also in many stories reffering to sporadic poets.

3. Taverns and wine-drinking

A definitely more marginalized form of entertainment were the taverns. Although wine-drinking was strictly prohibited by Islamic law, the substantial Orthodox, Armenian and Jewish population of Constantinople had the right (with the exception of a few brief periods of religious paroxysm) to own taverns. The areas with the most and most renowned taverns were Psamathia (Samatya), Vlaga (Langha), Kontoskali (Kumkapı), the shores of the Golden Horn and Bosporus and, of course, Galata, because of its proximity to the port and the naval yard, and of the density of its non-Muslim population. These taverns, where naturally one could encounter a variety of semi-marginalized occupations, such as dancers and prostitutes, were not only frequented by Christians or Jews; Muslims of the lower strata, but also often dervishes, janissaries and poets from the ulema classes, were regular patrons of these establishments. In the mid-17th century, the traveller Evliya Çelebi mentions taverns, most of which were located at Galata. Bozahanes, where boza was sold, a cheap kind of either non-alcoholic or low alcohol beer originating from central Asia, had a similar reputation to taverns. On the other hand, the legitimacy or not of these taverns generally naturally followed the fluctuations of wine's legal status. All in all, non-Muslims could freely own taverns, as long as they did not turn them into "sources of degeneration" and (at least in theory) as long as these were not located in the vicinity of mosques or solely in Muslim quarters. So, we learn that in Galata, a special officer from the Janissaries' corps was responsible for preventing tavern brawls; in fact, it was regulated that the most abject of the Galata drunkards were to be jailed until they recovered.[9] However, despite this general rule, prohibitions on taverns were a usual directive during times of generalized disorder. The frequent repetition of these orders, however, demonstrates the inability to enforce them.

4. Ethnic groups and entertainment

Generally, one should suppose, as far as the lower classes were concerned, there were no ethnic-religious borders in what concerned entertainment. From the twelve music and dance groups mentioned by Evliya Çelebi, for example, many included Muslims along with Orthodox, Armenians or Jews, while the Gypsy element was also prominent. On the other hand, the salvaged texts of shadow thatre or meddah clearly appealed to the Muslim Turkish-speaking audience, since in them different types of the city's minorities (including Turkish migrants) were systematically satirized. The simple fact, however, that both the repertoire and the basic characters of the shadow theatre, for example, survive almost intact in the form of the Greek "Karagiozis" (Karagöz), as well as the impressive

similarities in the musical production of both Muslims and Christians living in urban milieu (mainly in Constantinople and Smyrna), indicate that in reality these art forms appealed to a broader audience engaging all the ethnic-religious communities of the city.

5. Public festivals

Lastly, a special reference should be made to the great public festivities taking place on account of military successes or dynastic events, such as the birth or circumcision ceremony of a prince. In these festivities, which were especially grandiose, the whole city population participated, since, among other things, the festivities served as means of legitimizing the Sultan's imperial power. Guild parades, dinners served to all social groups, artistic celebrations covering the whole spectrum of Ottoman arts –from fireworks to conjurers and acrobats, and from parades to sports demonstrations – formed the scope of such ceremonies. The Ottoman festivals suspended all the distinctions of everyday life: rich and poor, Muslims and non-Muslims, public and private space converged during these celebrations, which ultimately confirmed the sultan's authority and the existing status quo.[10]

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1. See eg. Tietze, A. (ed.), *Mustafa 'Ali's Description of Cairo of 1599* (Wien 1975), p. 41; Aksan, V.H., *An Ottoman Statesman in War and Peace: Ahmed Resmi Efendi, 1700-1783* (Leiden – New York – Koln 1995), p. 61; Nabi, *Hayriyye*, Pala, I. (ed.), (Istanbul 1989), p. 191; Katib Celebi, *Katib Celebi'den secmeler*, Gokyay, O.S. (ed.), (Istanbul 1997), pp. 393, 403.

2. Rauwolff, L. et al., *A collection of curious travels & voyages in two tomes*... 1 (London 1693), pp. 42-43; Sandys, G., *A Relation of a Iourney begun An. Dom. 1610. Foure Bookes containing a description of the Turkish Empire, of Aegypt, of the Holy Land, of the Remote parts of Italy and Lands adioying* (London 1615), p. 72. The same observations were made also for the Greeks (p. 77).

3. İbrahim Peçevî (Peçuylu) Efendi, *Tarih-i Peçevi* 1 (İstanbul 1864-1866), pp. 363-365.

4. Tietze, A. (ed.), *Mustafa 'Ali's Description of Cairo of 1599* (Wien 1975), pp. 37-38; Mustafa Ali, *Gelibolulu Mustafa 'Ali ve Meva'idu'n-nefais fi-kava'idi'l-mecalis*, Seker, M. (ed.), (Ankara 1997), pp. 363-364; Katib Celebi, *The Balance of Truth*, Lewis, G.L. (transl.), (London 1957), p. 61; Sunbulzade Vehbi, *Lutfiyye*, Beyzadeoglu, S.A. (ed.), (Istanbul 1994), p. 159. See also Nutku, O., *Meddahl?k ve meddah hikayeleri* (Ankara 1977), p. 74 ff.; Hattox, R.S., *Coffee and Coffehouses. The Origins of a Social Beverage in the Medieval Near East* (Washington 1988).

5. Düzdağ, M.E., *Şeyhülislâm Ebussuud Efendi fetvaları ışığında 16. asır türk hayatı 2* (İstanbul 1983), pp. 148-149, No. 717, 723-724.

6. Mouradgea d'Ohsson, I., *Tableau général de l'Empire Othoman*, 4 (Paris 1788-1824), pp. 76ff., 82.

7. Mouradgea d'Ohsson, I., *Tableau général de l'Empire Othoman*, 4 (Paris 1788-1824), pp. 277-279. Foreign travelers generally mention that Turks do not gamble or bet and that they only play for pleasure, see eg. Sandys, G., *A Relation of a Iourney begun An. Dom. 1610. Foure Bookes containing a description of the Turkish Empire, of Aegypt, of the Holy Land, of the Remote parts of Italy, and Ilands adioyning* (London 1615), p. 65; however, towards the end of the 18th century Vehbî implies that bets were placed on backgammon games, see Sünbülzâde Vehbî, *Lutfiyye*, Beyzâdeoğlu, S.A. (ed.), (İstanbul 1994), pp. 63-64; compare Mustafa Ali, *Gelibolulu Mustafa 'Âlî ve Mevâ'idü'n-nefâis fî-kavâ'idi'lmecâlis*, Şeker, M. (ed.), (Ankara 1997), p. 364.

8. For coffee-houses and storytellers (meddah) also see Nutku, Ö., *Meddahlık ve meddah hikâyeleri* (Ankara 1977), pp. 31ff., and especially pp. 73ff.

9. Evliya Çelebi, *Evliya Çelebi Seyahatnâmesi. Topkapı Sarayı Bağdat 304 Yazmasının Transkripsiyonu-Dizini. 1. Kitap: İstanbul*, Gökyay, O.Ş. (ed.), (İstanbul 1996), pp. 184-85/129b-130a.

10. Nutku, Ö., IV. *Mehmet'in Edirne Şenliği (1675)* (Ankara 1972); And, M., "Le 'Commonwealth' des arts turcs: les Fêtes Ottomanes", *Der Islam* 59 (1982), pp. 285-297; Sevengil, R.A., *İstanbul nasıl eğleniyordu (1453'ten 1927'e kadar)*, Önal, S. (ed.), (İstanbul 1993), pp. 60ff.; Faroqhi, S., *Κουλτούρα και καθημερινή ζωή στην Οθωμανική Αυτοκρατορία από τον Μεσαίωνα ως τις αρχές του 20ού αιώνα* (Αθήνα 2000), pp. 213 ff.

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Glossary :

dervish

A member of one of the religious fraternities of Islam that were characterized by spirituality, a mystical relationship with the divine, and a modest way of life. The most known among the dervish orders in the Ottoman Empire are the Mevlevi and the Bektashi.

fetva

A written consultory response on religious matters which is edicted by the *müfti*.

imam

A spiritual and religious leader in Islamic communities. He' s the head of a mosque and a preacher. In shiite tradition this term refers to the leader of the faithful, without seperating the spiritual/religious jurisdictions from the socio-political ones.

kadi

Office that combinbed judicial, notarial and administrative duties. The kadi, who held court at the kaza's seat, registered all legal acts and documents in the court's codices (sicil). The kadi passed judgement based on the saria (the holy law of Islam), taking also into consideration the kanun (sultanic law) and the customary law (örf). Resort to his court had all the subjects of the Empire. The kadi had also administrative duties, which he performed in collaboration with the officials of the kaza., and he had to supervise tax collection.

muezzin

A muslim at the service of a mosque, who invites by chanting from the minaret, the believers to participate in prayer.

sheikulislam

The highest rank of interpreter of the religious law (*mouftis*) in the Ottoman empire and the head of the ulemas' corps. His decisions had the validity of a law.

ulema

A graduate of an Islamic religious-school (*medrese*) who has the prospect of becoming a *kadi* (religious judge) or a *moufti* (interpreter of the religious law), an *imam* or to occupy some other religious office.

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