Arabesk Culture: A Case of Modernization and Popular Identity (Meral Özbek)

A type of popular music emerged in Turkey at the end of 1960s that captured the passions of rural migrants living in gecekondu, or urban squatter settlements. It is known as arabesk music, and it is a new hybrid genre mixing Turkish classical and folk elements with those of the West and Egypt. The term “arabesk” was originally coined to designate—and denigrate—these popular songs, but it later came to describe the entire migrant culture formed at the peripheries of Turkish cities.

Since the late 1970s, various attempts have been made to explain the rise of arabesk culture and its social significance. In the majority of these explanations, arabesk is seen as a threat in its so-called impurity, fatalistic outlook, and degeneration. It is said to ruralize and contaminate the urban environment. Underlying these dominant appraisals is “classical modernization theory,” which assumes a duality between the traditional and the modern and postulates a cycle that admits a basic backwardness of the traditional followed by a transition period in which tradition gives way to modernity. Arabesk culture has been portrayed as the product of this transitional period—an alien and malformed element marginal to society that is supposed to fade away as industrialization and urbanization proceed.

The basic premise of this essay is that arabesk is not an anomaly but is instead a historical formation of popular culture, constructed and lived through the process of spatial and symbolic migration in the Turkish path through modernity. This culture of hybridity was first made popular by the masses of rural migrants, giving voice to experiences shaped by the rapid modernization of Turkish society since the 1950s. It is the much-disputed urban culture of the peasant generations whom the founders of the Turkish republic once revered as the authentic foundation of the new society but whose “uncultured” presence, after they had migrated to live subordinately at the fringes of the urban centers as a spare army of labor, has been much resented by the various established urban others. The story of arabesk, therefore, tells also a specific story about the “Westernization” of the so-called Third World, and understanding arabesk is crucial to comprehending the contradictions and ambivalences of the project and process of Turkish modernity.

One way of thinking about arabesk is to see it as a metaphor for popular identity—for the responses of the urbanizing popular classes to the capitalist modernization process in Turkey. Official cultural politics, growing market forces, the development of a culture industry, and popular traditions and changing lifestyles at the margins of society have all prepared the ground and provided the materials for the gradual articulation of arabesk music and culture. But it was specifically the spontaneous popular response that simultaneously opposed and affirmed the modernizing practices that gave arabesk its hybrid form and its original, potent energy.

The first public representation of this popular response appeared in the arabesk music of Orhan Gencebay, the founding musician of the style. Crystallized in Gencebay’s music is the ambivalent structure of feeling of the popular masses that found its well-spring in the experience of displacement, with its double-edged emotions of liberation and desolation under the process of modernization.
Although arabesk remained a hybrid musical genre, its form, content, production, reception patterns, and social significance have changed markedly since the mid-1960s. The ideological journey of arabesk in these years can be broadly periodized according to its relationship with the changing politics of capitalism in Turkey, from the politics of nationalist developmentalism to those of transnational market orientation after the 1980s.

The 1970s represent the zenith in arabesk’s journey as a popular response. After that decade, arabesk culture began to lose its subversive originality and came under the hegemony of neoconservative ideologies and a neoliberal economic restructuring. As the popular urban masses who nurtured arabesk became cultural and political forces to be reckoned with, and as the culture industry developed, their cultural expressions were increasingly drawn into the ideological and political mainstream. The music itself became diffused, fragmented, and commercialized; while some of it was marginalized, some climbed the cultural ladder, reaching far beyond the original enclave in its appeal. The expansion of arabesk beyond gecekondu borders after the 1980s revealed also that arabesk, as an emotional vocabulary, addressed people from many different walks of life and cut across experiences of displacement far beyond the encounter between the rural and the urban—including other cultural exclusions and the unrequited Turkish love for the “West.”

The responses of intellectuals to arabesk have themselves been a force in the journey of the genre. Their debates are important not because they explain the social underpinnings of the arabesk formation but because they reveal the dominant aspirations of Turkish modernity. The labeling of the identities of the migrant and subordinated others as “arabesk” and the discourses and conflicts built around it helped to expand the story of arabesk from the cultural to the ideological arena. Thus, arabesk became a contentious topic after the 1980s in debates over national and urban identities and lifestyles. Ironically, the intellectuals’ questions of “who we are” and “how we should live” were precisely the same ones the arabesk–loving masses themselves were posing when their voices found an outlet in the music of Orhan Gencebay at the end of the 1960s.

**The Hybrid Roots of Arabesk Music**

Arabesk music was first produced in Istanbul during the mid-1960s, when the Turkish music industry was in its infancy and was providing an avenue of creative expression for those excluded from state–controlled media and culture. Orhan Gencebay was its most famous early exponent. The term “arabesk” was already known to the music community of the early 1960s when it was used to describe the work of the popular composer Suat Sayin. Sayin was writing light versions of Turkish “art” music—the name given to the derivative of classical Ottoman court music—and plagiarizing some melodies from Egypt. His major contribution was the way in which he orchestrated this music. Instead of using one each of the traditional instruments, as was the convention, Sayin multiplied their number and augmented them with a Western string section following the Egyptian style. Thus, in an interesting twist, Western influences seeped into Turkish art music via Egypt.

Orhan Gencebay appeared on the scene in the mid-1960s. A self-taught musician, he was influenced by many other musicians, some excluded from official media and others more
classical or mainstream practitioners of Turkish folk music and art music. In 1966, when Gencebay wrote his first popular song, “No Raft in the Ocean to Hold Onto” (Deryada Bir Salim Yok), he combined various folk and classical instruments with Western strings. Although the tune was not originally Arabic, its orchestration led orthodox classical and radio musicians to consider Gencebay an arabesk musician too, after Sayin. At that point, “arabesk” was a term confined to a small music community; it had not yet entered the public debates over Turkish cultural identity. But the connotations intended in its initial labeling—impurity, nonbelonging, and backwardness owing to Arabic influence—were to remain thereafter.

A migrant himself, Orhan Gencebay had left his Black Sea hometown of Samsun for Istanbul to achieve recognition as a musician at a time when the myth of the “golden rocks and lands of Istanbul” referred plausibly to actual conditions. Studies of arabesk have ignored the fact that its emergence coincided with a relative cultural renaissance in Turkish society that lasted until the late 1970s. This renaissance was a product of diverse struggles and cultural projects of earlier decades, and it culminated in the strengthening of democratic principles and fundamental human rights in the 1961 Constitution, and in a more equitable distribution of income. The 1960s were a time of experimentation and innovation in popular culture and provided fertile ground for the creative exchange of influences among various musical traditions. After 1962, the fruits of these endeavors began to appear on the market, gradually feeding an expanding record industry. This wave of innovation owed itself also to the widening accessibility of state-owned radio, which, after the late 1930s, began introducing Turkish folk music and classical and art music across the country, along with Western classical and pop music. These musical genres had earlier been confined to regional production and consumption.

One conspicuous result of this musical renaissance in the 1960s was the reinvention of, and renewed appreciation for, folk music and instruments. The primary folk music instrument, the baglama, or long–necked lute, in particular became a musical icon for popular and radical musicians and for the leftist militants of the 1960s and 1970s. Folk elements began to be blended into rock music, culminating in a new musical genre called Anatolian rock music. The newfound popularity of Anatolian folk music played a crucial role in determining the future of arabesk music.

It was the incorporation of folk music elements into the lush Sayin–style orchestration of Turkish art music that characterized Orhan Gencebay’s work and gave it the locus of its identity. Gencebay is a true virtuoso of the baglama and has a unique playing style into which he has worked various influences. Indeed, he has said that what hurt him most in the 1950s, when American rock music and Turkish art music were reigning on the music scene, was the disdain shown toward the baglama. He then began playing famous Turkish art and Western rock songs with it, especially the songs of Elvis Presley, trying to show that “this innocent instrument [was] capable of playing every kind of music.”

In 1968, Gencebay wrote and performed “Give Me Consolation” (Bir Teselli Ver), and then “Nobody Is without Fault” (Hatasiz Kul Olmaz), which made a breakthrough as something more than just music. Something in the lyrics and melodies of these works resonated with the oral vocabularies, musical traditions, and new lifestyles of the gecekondu populations.
The music tapped into the new private language growing at the outer margins of the big cities, a language that expressed the rising expectations, desires, and frustrations of the urbanizing popular masses under the experience of the urban encounter. The culture of migration and subordination had found a voice in Gencebay’s work and image, and that voice was carried via his music into public representation. Within a decade, the same music was to become an object of scorn in the judging eyes of the established urban others.

The hybrid quality of Gencebay’s music was its foremost characteristic, both in its musical elements and in the ideas expressed in its lyrics. The “sliding” singing style performed in a dramatic voice, the use of counterpoint and lush orchestration, and the emphasis on rhythm created an alluring sound and feel quite new for the period. Gencebay’s music is very emotional and melodic, as is Turkish music in general. The dominant theme in the lyrics is love, and all other themes dissolve into lyrics about love or are spoken through the authority of love.

The pervasive theme of love forces the lyrics to center on the first person (I), the beloved (you), and the unique importance of their union (we) in the world. The “world” refers to different habitats: the inner world of the lover, the union of lover and beloved, and human life at large. The beloved “you” is often left abstract. She is the intimate fellow sufferer, as the beloved has always been in Turkish mystic poetry. Sometimes the “you” is displaced from the beloved and used to address God or fate. At other times it seems to be representing an abstract subject translatable as society or even state or any perceived oppressor. The “we” is also a vague collective category of “lovers” who are described as poor, lonely, homeless sufferers (garip) searching for “truth” in the form of love. The “I” is the conjurer, yearning for love and solace from the “you.” And the “you” is capable of giving happiness as well as oppression, love as well as humiliation, solace as well as suffering. At times, the lover turns to God asking plaintively, is it “me who is baffled or you, my God?” When the beloved is just and compassionate, she is depicted as the sun, life, and happiness itself. The “I,” who yearns to belong, feels completed by submission to and becoming one with the “you.”

All through this tangle of meaning, the identity of the speaker “I” is problematized and becomes infused with questions of life and death, love and hate, and happiness and suffering. Despite this questioning, however, the “I” is always the innocent one, the one who has cause to blame and accuse the other of not allowing him to live in love. The “I” cannot bear the possibility of isolation from the beloved, which would break the bonds of love and suffering between the two. Though protesting against suffering in this “dreamlike world,” the lover also endures and resigns himself to that state by considering it an “experience.” Even the pain of unrequited love offers some solace, because love itself is the ultimate balance, the solution to the misery in the world—the world that obstructs one’s right to live in love.

The early lyrics of Orhan Gencebay’s songs are usually composed of popular traditional concepts given a mystically religious voice that is secular in intent. But the articulation of the lyrics with the sounds of the melodies amounts to an invention of popular tradition containing connotations that were readily understood and in tune with the popular discontent and protest specific to the 1970s. Poverty, displacement, deprivation, and the harsh daily round of urban life are not explicitly described in arabesk lyrics, but they are expressed abstractly and through a feeling of disquiet and yearning that permeates the music. Although
the lyrics do not speak directly of social inequities, they have struck a sympathetic chord in the people who receive their immediate contextual meaning.8

It is worth noting the difference between the types of themes that Orhan Gencebay used in songs shaped more by folk music and those in songs shaped by Turkish art music. His folk-style-dominated music was the vehicle for stirring social themes put to voice by the lover, whose laments to the beloved are against the suffering in the world. In his art music, private, personal love reigns supreme. Because love, in this symbolic discourse, is conceived of as analogous to the right to live in dignity, the harsh social conditions that prevent love constitute an obstacle to a fulfilling life.9 Thus, in this symbolic network, both the personal and the communal levels are addressed through the vocabulary of love, which is itself offered ultimately as the imaginary solution for handling the “problem of meaning” caused by displacement under modernization. It was this new articulation of the long Anatolian tradition of popular justice that gave Orhan Gencebay’s arabesk its democratic resonance. Gencebay’s arabesk music created a specific “affective/moral vocabulary” for the urban popular masses who engaged daily in a struggle to survive, resist, and be recognized.10

The Popularity of Arabesk during Periods of Change

Orhan Gencebay found himself a popular hero at the end of the 1960s. He had become almost an urban minstrel (asik). His image grew into that of a benevolent older brother who was manly, trustworthy, and tolerant and who spoke against injustice, humiliation, and poverty. His lyrics were concerned with the problems of life and love, usually put forth in plain, wise sayings clothed in Anatolian asik tradition and folk mysticism.

The protest tradition in Turkish folk poetry and music had seen a revival beginning with the end of the 1950s. Asiks were migrating to the major cities, bringing their baglamas and new poems that no longer focused on the simple conflict between rich and poor but contained more sophisticated themes protesting what they called the “corrupt social order.” Although the revived protest tradition coursed through Gencebay’s arabesk music, he diluted and blended it, inventing a new tradition of humanism for mass consumption. The title of one of Gencebay’s most famous songs, “Down with This World” (Batsin Bu Dünya), might seem to indicate an utter rejection of it, but in fact Gencebay liked to live in this changing world—he simply wanted it to be a better place. For him, change should come through fusion and compassion rather than through exclusion and force. The title is meant to strengthen people’s emotional response against the human hosts and dehumanizing assaults of capitalist modernization.

The metaphorical response of Gencebay’s work to modernization is, on the whole, an ambivalent one. There is an uneasiness in which modernization is both affirmed and denied, submitted to and resisted. His work has both welcomed the possibilities the process of modernization offers and denied the reality of the exclusion and injustice it has caused. Gencebay has mixed different musics, made use of modern technology, and incorporated popular traditions to voice this melange of experience. Ambivalence surfaces also in his music, especially in the soaring melodic lines that evoke a yearning simultaneously defiant, sad, and hopeful.11
The growth of the Turkish audiocassette industry and the importation and production of new music technology prepared the ground for the diffusion and proliferation of arabesk music beginning in the 1970s and especially during the 1980s. Although arabesk music was excluded from state-run radio and television because it did not fit into any of the officially sanctioned musical modes, by the mid–1970s it was everywhere. It could be heard in music halls and blaring from cassette players in minibuses and taxis, and it could be enjoyed in workplaces in the informal sector, in squatter homes, and in drinking establishments (meyhanes). Arabesk invaded virtually every private and public sphere, from theaters that showed movies of arabesk singers to thoroughfares where street peddlers sold cassettes. It traveled from squatter homes back to the city center in taxis and minibuses run by the migrants themselves. Truck drivers carried it from city to city. So closely associated with migration and with its literal means of transport was arabesk music that during the 1970s it was often called “minibus music” or “gecekondu music.” Gaudily decorated minibuses took migrants through urban streets to jobs in the formal and informal sectors, where their music, language, values, and manners interacted and clashed with those of the urban middle and upper classes.

The first generations of migrants were also travelers between urban squatter settlements and rural native villages, where they visited relatives and brought provisions for the winter. They seem not, however, to have maintained illusions about permanent return to the village, no matter how impoverished their lives were. Yet to satisfy their urgent daily needs, which ranged from building or renting gecekondu to finding jobs, they created informal clusters and networks of kinship, townsman, and neighborhood relations within the larger urban setting. Migrants preserved their sense of individual and communal identity through these networks. The one main axis for a migrant’s identity stemmed from these clusters and depended on the answer to the question, “Where are you from?”

The most famous arabesk singers came from outside Istanbul. Their fame and popularity corresponded more or less to their regional place of origin and the size of the migrant population coming from that area to Istanbul. Orhan Gencebay became famous during the late 1960s, when migrants were moving to Istanbul in large numbers from the middle and northern parts of Anatolia. Ferdi Tayfur and Müslüm Gürses reached their peak of popularity in the late 1970s, when the south and east fed Istanbul with migrants. Emrah and Ibrahim Tatlıses were stars of the 1980s, when massive numbers arrived in Istanbul from the southeast. Although good arabesk singers inflected their music with the distinct accents, sounds, images, and moods of their respective regions, they all retained their general appeal to the poor and powerless. Gradually, these regionalisms were reworked in Istanbul and distributed throughout Anatolia, so that arabesk music became the most widespread popular genre in Turkey in the 1980s.

The end of the 1970s was a time of growing economic depression and deep political crisis. It was also a time when cultural tensions and social contradictions resulting from the process of migration came to the fore, and it was publicly realized that rural migrants were not mere visitors to the cities. Increasing the urban population density by about 50 percent, harboring radical leftist militancy, and focusing their infrastructural and social demands at the level of municipalities, the gecekondu populations proved that they had come to stay. The term
“arabesk” then superseded the phrases “minibus music” and “gecekondu music” irreversibly. “Arabesk” began to encompass not just a musical genre but the entire lifestyle and mentality of the gecekondu, including both migrant and nonmigrant urban popular classes. It provided an “arbitrary closure” for multiple popular identities, separating and positioning them as the urban “other.”

During the 1980s, the new political rulers played a conscious game of hegemony that revolved around manipulating and winning the support of the gecekondu masses, who were now seen as worth wooing for their votes. New right-wing populist policies began to be realized with the victories of the Motherland Party (Anavatan Partisi), implementing material rewards at the level of municipalities and securing the necessary ideological interpolations at the national level.

Indeed, the political significance of arabesk was acknowledged by Turgut Özal well before he formed the Motherland Party and became prime minister in 1983. In 1979 he had written a major report to Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel of the Justice Party (Adalet Partisi) in which he pointed out that the very fluid votes of the gecekondu held the key to the national elections (a point that proved true). The Motherland Party formed a research unit called the Arabesk Group to study the cultural habits, likes, and dislikes of the gecekondu people. Later, the party hired a major public opinion research organization to develop a voter profile of the party, the outcome of which contended that those who had voted for the Motherland Party were, in general, conservative. But even the most conservative of these voters were sympathetic to liberal pluralism. The game of hegemony had its results, and the research found what it had looked for from the start—that the voters were neoconservatives or neoliberals.

The 1983 elections in Turkey saw, for the first time, mass political advertising. Among other things, the Özalist political campaigns made widespread use of arabesk music. Özal, in fact, was genuinely fond of the music and employed it to support his themes that all Turks were “lovers” and that he respected and welcomed all of the four main political ideologies (extreme right, Islamist, center right, and social democrat) into Motherland’s fold. Just as Gencebay’s music articulated the popular classes’ demand for change through a fusion of the popular tradition and the new values, so did this neoconservative project do so by conjoining conservative values with the new market values. But in this new political arena, the fusion of the old and the new shifted away from being a means of providing for the welfare of the popular classes toward becoming an avenue to victory for the powerful new entrepreneurs of the emerging financial, commercial, and trade arenas and their politicians. Against this background, arabesk lost its utopian connotations and became increasingly associated with pragmatic concerns such as registering squatter houses or “turning the corner without due labor.”

Throughout the 1980s, therefore, the story of arabesk became increasingly complex as the popular classes partially tuned into the neoconservative politics of the new right. Clientelism and promises of legalizing gecekondu ownership rights manipulated gecekondu votes before each election. As land speculation became rampant, some former gecekondu dwellers took advantage of rising property values and built apartments, while a gecekondu mafia flourished in the real estate market. With the influence of mass media, arabesk also came to
characterize the lifestyle, tastes, and sentiments of a newly rich group with provincial origins: new economic elites of finance, commerce, and trade. The sensationalistic media began broadcasting images of the new rich displaying incompatible arabesk tastes, epitomized in the stereotype of their drinking alafranka (Western) whiskey while eating alaturka (Turkish) lahmacun. The audience for arabesk music had expanded to include not only the masses of gecekondu dwellers and much of the rural population but also sections of the middle and ruling classes of the 1980s. Thus, during the second half of the 1980s, as arabesk became the most widespread music across the country, the earlier public awareness of poverty and subordination at the urban peripheries waned. Arabesk began to be used as a metaphor for Özal’s regime.

Since the end of the 1970s, arabesk as a musical genre had evolved, mutated, and proliferated as it became more popular and gained, through improved technology, a wider and more diversified reception. Many of these changes can be seen in the musical output of Orhan Gencebay, who is still considered the “king” of arabesk. During the 1980s, although the theme of love remained a dominant feature of arabesk music, the political protest of earlier songs evaporated, as did the tension in the music between grief and hope. As it became a more commercial genre, spawning profitable subindustries in production, writing, performance, videos, and advertising, arabesk’s themes became more worldly and concrete, and fame began to go to new, newsworthy singers. (Orhan Gencebay, however, remained writer, performer, and producer of his own music.) Recent technology and recording techniques have also changed the sound of arabesk and created variations on it; one of the most widespread forms in the 1980s was called “taverna” music.19

Arabesk music greatly influenced the genres of Turkish art music, folk music, and pop music—the established categories of Turkish music disseminated by the state–run mass media. Arabesk melodic patterns, rhythmic emphases, and performance styles seeped into these other genres, although arabesk itself remained prohibited. Until the emergence of private television and radio channels in the 1990s, only the leading singers were allowed to perform on national holidays.

After the mid–1980s, arabesk not only began to be used widely in political campaign songs and as theme music at football games but also was admitted to the world of “legitimate” entertainment and was assimilated by the culture industry. Orhan Gencebay was elevated to the status of “classic” arabesk. Ferdi Tayfur also gained wide and lasting acceptance as the second major star of arabesk, while Müslüm Gürses’s transgressive music and image developed into a cult. Arabesk continued to produce protest singers, most notably Ahmet Kaya, who defined his music as “the opposition of emotions.” Kaya, like Gürses, appealed most strongly to marginalized youths, the “lads” excluded from the dominant culture. The media began to talk of his music as “revolutionary arabesk,” just as it called other new versions “Islamist” and “nationalist” arabesks. Common to all of them was performance style.

The imaginary collective identity of the migrant culture given voice by the arabesk music of the 1970s seems to have lost its “closure” in the mid–1990s. The hybrid quality of arabesk has penetrated other genres as arabesk has spread and lost its previous class anchoring in popular discontent and protest. Arabesk has been superseded now by a vibrant new pop
music and culture that owes much to arabesk, as well as to MTV and a reinvention of the Turkish pop music of the 1960s and 1970s. Although the three now–classic arabesk musicians are still well received, audiences in general are no longer partisans of a single arabesk singer. Instead, there seems to be a desire to embrace more singers and styles, from arabesk to pop, and not to align oneself so passionately with a single performer.

The changing journey of arabesk is apparent not only in its widening appeal but also in the changing attitudes of its singers and followers toward the dominant appraisal that arabesk is uncultured. Even more than differences in class, region, and income, it is differences in educational assets that continue to overdetermine the discourses on arabesk culture and the identity clashes lived around it. A decade earlier, arabesk singers expressed their sentiments defensively; now, they seem more self–confident, and their followers are also more open in their rage against their non–arabesk counterparts. This defiance was clearly articulated by the end of the 1980s, when the terms maganda and zonta, originally created by cartoonists, entered the popular vocabulary to describe and denigrate arabesk aficionados as vulgar, sexist, and uneducated. Youths at the fringes of the dominant urban culture responded by coining their own term, entel, as a sarcastic nickname for preening, “sterile” intellectuals.20 Entels were defined as the natives of Istanbul, who were the antitheses of the Anatolian migrants.21

In interviews, Ferdi Tayfur often mentions the difficult circumstances of his life—the death of his father and the necessity of his foregoing an education in order to support his family by manual labor—and contrasts it with the lives of the educated rich, who humiliate the poor but are in fact no better than they. Such bitterness is also reflected in arabesk singers’ refusal to describe their work as arabesk, because of the term’s “dirty” connotations. Orhan Gencebay, for example, insisting that his music has nothing to do with the Arabs, refers to his own work as “free Turkish music,” in opposition to the stilted, one–dimensional, officially sanctioned performances of Turkish music. He maintains that his music is more than an outgrowth of the migrant experience—he has created a new mixed genre that could address all Turks, rural and urban alike.

So, although arabesk singers have found honor in their work and their popular recognition, they have not embraced the label “arabesk” with enthusiasm. This is less true for later generations of musicians and migrants, who do not hesitate to assert their Anatolian origins. Their bolder attitude was expressed by the folk–arabesk singer Ibrahim Tatlıses during the 1980s. Tatlıses became famous for his beautiful Kurdish voice and folk songs and was known to have underground supporters as well as sympathy for Turgut Özal, which was reciprocated by the late president. He emphasized bravado and masculinity, which resulted in much criticism and in his ultimately being branded a vulgar maganda. But Tatlıses was unfazed and began to parody himself, playing up the maganda stereotype and making fun of himself and his critics.

The role gender plays in the formation and popularity of arabesk music is a complex question. Orhan Gencebay, who implied in his arabesk that suffering would one day end, retained his image of sedate manliness. Ferdi Tayfur, who became famous after him during the depression years at the end of the 1970s, showed, in his gloomier arabesk, that men did cry in a society in which manliness was predominantly defined as being tough. Although a
number of female arabesk singers have become popular and the music has been well received by women in general, the genre has remained closely bound to masculine culture. It is strongly associated with mustaches, masculine friendship, and raki–drinking, cigarette–smoking rituals.

But this masculine ethos seems to have its ambiguities. Its bravado hides a sense of self–doubt, of a self devalued under the gaze of a dominant “other” that pushes these men into a vulnerable status in society.22 Thus, the emotional disposition of a subordinated self positions these men alongside other excluded people and seems to admit, in effect, a crossing of the boundaries of gender and an acceptance of the permeability of identities. The considerable number and popularity of transsexual arabesk singers, including the famous Bülent Ersoy, adds to this blurring of the conventional boundaries between genders. The dominant discourse on arabesk, on the other hand, is filled with gender–inscribed adjectives such as “passive,” “depressed,” and “yelling,” indicting this ambivalent emotional disposition in arabesk culture.

Arabesk and the Debate over National Cultural Identity

Since the late 1970s, many writers have debated the origins and the meaning of arabesk culture in Turkey. The dominant appraisal has been that because Turkey was an “underdeveloped country,” its path toward modernization was “crooked,” and arabesk, as a “degraded” genre, was simply a reflection of this deviation. And because arabesk music was formed concomitantly with the growth of market forces in the musical arena, it was considered a mere entertainment administered to the semi–peasant masses.23 In the Encyclopedia of Music, arabesk is defined as “a music of alienation”—the rural migrants could not leave their traditional values behind, could not adapt to the urban environment, and so nourished hatred toward it. Arabesk, the article continues, which has no musical value, provides the means for these people to “yell out” their distress and depression.24 These attitudes toward arabesk led studies of it to be restricted by the “integration perspective.” The musical characteristics of arabesk and the new lifestyles and subjectivities being constructed on the peripheries of urban culture have been left out of the research agenda.25

Bureaucrats, intellectuals, and artists of disparate cultural and political persuasions have shared the opinion that arabesk is a vulgar, degenerate genre, though their reasons differed. For bureaucrats in general, and producers of state–run television and radio in particular, any Turkish music that did not fit into the officially sanctioned categories of Turkish art music, Turkish folk music, Turkish light (pop) music, or polyphonic (Western) music was assumed to be arabesk music and therefore subject to censorship—alongside music with radical or leftist lyrics. Most leftist thinkers also distanced themselves from arabesk, which they viewed as a traditional (read, backward) genre that promoted a fatalistic viewpoint, provided a false, easily manipulated consciousness, and was devoid of the element of social protest. It was, in this sense, no more than “opium for the masses.” Turkish classical and folk musicians, on the other hand, condemned arabesk for polluting the “pure” traditions with Arab and Western influences.

Indeed, the negative connotations of arabesk actually increased with time. Initially, the label “arabesk” had meant that the music was only an imitation; it did not belong to “our” culture,
since it was of Arabic origin, and all things Arabic were thought to have been left behind as
the country Westernized. After 1980, arabesk gained a negative political connotation as well,
owing to its affiliation with the neoliberal practices of the Motherland Party. By the mid–
1980s, influential writers had begun using the term “arabesk” to describe virtually anything
in Turkish social life that they considered degenerate: arabesk democracy, economy, people,
tastes, sentiments, and ways of thinking and living. It was as if the term had finally provided
a name for the problem of Turkish identity in a society long struggling with its self–image as
an underdeveloped state. It had almost become a metaphor for Turkey’s unrequited love for
the “West.” The broad use of the term “arabesk” described a social reality that fit neither the
ideal traditional (Eastern) nor the modern (Western) forms, relationships, practices, and
values but instead was completely unforeseen, odd, and embarrassing. Because arabesk was
considered backward in every way and fatalistic in its vision, it became a symbol of
everything that must be jettisoned from society.

The debate over arabesk music and culture has raged so fiercely because this was the first
massive popular cultural formation that grew in the hothouse of modernizing Turkey. It
spontaneously transgressed and questioned accepted notions about Turkish cultural identity.
That the debate centered on music was no coincidence. The origins of the debates on music
go back to the closing of the military music center—the Mehterhane—during the abolition of
the Janissary army in 1826, when the Ottoman government came out in favor of Western
music. Republican reforms of the 1920s also influenced the traditional music scene. When
the Ottoman dervish lodges were closed by the state in 1925 during secularization, the
second most vital arena for the production of traditional music, after the Ottoman court itself,
was eliminated. A year later, education in Turkish music was proscribed. For fifteen
months in 1934–35, in the state’s fervor to structure a national identity fixed on a Western cultural
model, all Turkish music was banned on private radio.

The official cultural politics of the Turkish republic, especially in its early years, gave
priority to Western classical music and—in its visions of populism—Turkish folk music, and
it promoted a “Westernized” and “modernized” version of Turkish folk music as well.
Behind such moves was the influence of the nationalist thought of Ziya Gökalp (1876–
1924), who drew a sharp distinction between civilization and culture. According to Gökalp,
the new civilization was universal and was represented by Western science, technology, and
intellectual developments. Culture, however, was particular to a society and was represented
by a people’s spirit, values, and aspirations. For Gökalp, Ottoman classical music belonged
to the realm of old civilization and was, moreover, of Byzantine origin with Arab inflections,
so it could hardly represent the new Turkish national identity. Anatolian folklore and folk
music, however, were outgrowths of Turkish culture before Islamization and therefore were
the cultural resources around which a Turkish national identity could be formed. So it was a
synthesis of Western civilization and Turkish folklore that formed the foundation on which
the new identity was to arise.

During the early 1930s, a republican campaign was launched for a radio of “education,
culture, and propaganda” to oppose the broadcasting policy of the then–private radio
industry. Critics fervently accused private radio producers of acting merely as entertainers
and commercial disseminators of “tasteless and fatalist” Turkish art songs, the so–called
alaturka music of the period.26 In 1936, when the state took control of private radio stations,
it began broadcasting the products of cultural projects developed by bureaucrats and scholars in their efforts to build and impose a preferred national culture. Thus, the tension between alaturka and alafranka music has had a long history and lies at the heart of an on–going debate over the crafting of the Turkish national identity—an identity into which the tension between the traditional and the modern was easily integrated.

By promoting Western music and Turkish folk music while neglecting, censuring, and prohibiting Turkish classical and art music or any reinvention different from the state–sanctioned modes, the cultural politics of the Turkish state contributed to the development of arabesk music and to its social significance. The state’s actions have put music and culture at the center of the national ideological and political struggle since the foundation of the republic. In doing so, they set the stage for the struggle among the intelligentsia, between the state and the people, and between the educated and the uneducated.

At the end of the 1980s, for the first time, under Turgut Özal’s influence, there was a discussion about permitting the performance of arabesk music on Turkish radio and television. This softening of the state line on arabesk seemed to culminate in 1988 with the Second National Congress for Music, in which the subject of arabesk was at last included. In 1989, the Ministry of Cultural Affairs attempted to commission from an arabesk composer an arabesk song devoid of grief. It was hoped, rather naively, that this song could be used as a model for future production and would elevate arabesk from its general “vulgarity” and “tastelessness.” The effort came to nothing.

With the 1990s, a major source of dissemination for arabesk has been the new private television stations, whose motto is “whatever sells well gets air time.” The expanding neoliberal atmosphere and the emergence of a new, private mass media have provided fertile ground for a new appreciation of arabesk that competes with the earlier appraisal. This new appraisal accords with the mythical discourse of the Özalist regime, which maintains that Turkey has not just come a long way toward modernization but has in fact achieved it. Turkey has recently “jumped directly into modernity” in its own peculiar fashion. Following this line, if people want to buy arabesk music, there is “no problem,” since this is a time of free choice, and it is thanks to the migrants that urban culture has become more pluralistic and colorful.

During decades past, under Kemalist authoritarianism (now referred to by some as First Republicanism), arabesk was suppressed and conceived of as a disquieting throwback to Eastern traditions, hardly comparable to anything from the West. Under the so–called Second Republicanism there is a more confident attitude that no longer fears everything from the East and is not obsessed with cultural purity. This new pragmatism, however, is indexed to market forces, which dispense with the norms of public responsibility and social justice. Moreover, by hiding the asymmetrical power relations that make and cut through different tastes and identities, it leaves them untouched and institutionalizes an easy, surface pluralism.

In the Turkey of the mid–1990s, the debates over arabesk have lost their cultural vibration. The rising Islamist Welfare Party (Refah Partisi) and the threat of Islamist fundamentalism are now at the center of the cultural and political agenda, while the Kurdish issue, as it
pertains to ethnic identity or political solutions, is not yet a publicly debatable subject under a rising, popularized racist nationalism. By the late 1980s, arabesk had already lost its allure as a radical popular formation that used the materials of modernity to resist modernizing control from above. After the left–wing political milieu of the 1970s, in which arabesk had derived its subversive significance, was undermined by the military coup, the nodal point that articulated arabesk as a democratic discourse about the right to live in dignity was loosened. Arabesk sentiments in general became more easily incorporated into and revealed through different subjectivities and political orientations after the 1980s. Losing its original anchoring in “low modernism,” arabesk has become so diffused that it is now considered a “transclass taste” and structure of feeling.27

Although arabesk culture was neutralized and its subversive elements marginalized, the state of poverty and subordination from which it sprouted has not been eliminated. Resistance and protest persist, in various forms, on the fringes of the urban landscapes and in the corners of the dominant culture—the more public manifestations of which have yet to show. Meanwhile, in the place of old shanty gecekondu there have arisen shanty multistoried apartment complexes as subcities with virtually no urban amenities on their outskirts.28 In recent years, the cleavage has markedly increased between the peripheral neighborhoods and the suburban villa–towns of the upper–middle class and, in the urban core, the commercial and financial centers, shopping malls, and five–star hotels. The new urban spaces constructed for presumably educated and high–income customers are promoted for their convenient and sterile lifestyles protected from the physical and “cultural” contamination of the city. The differentiation of living, working, and consumption spaces for different classes and groups in greater Istanbul signifies a social fracture that is splitting Turkey into at least two unequal societies, if not into more.

It is no coincidence that current political debate over the Islamist Welfare Party revolves around the term “lifestyle.” The dominant camps in this conflict draw their bases of support from groups with quite different lifestyles. The Islamist Welfare Party, while developing its own bourgeoisie and its new intellectuals, grew by winning broad support from the old and new gecekondu populations with its populist motto of “pure and just order.” Opposed to it is a loose group consisting of the radical bourgeoisie, state bureaucrats, the army, the urban middle classes, Kemalist intellectuals, the “Second Republicans,” and some radical intellectuals. Secularism and the Western–modern way of life are about the only common ground this otherwise incompatible alliance has.

It is clear that class does not correspond “properly” to political culture because class boundaries in Turkey have been increasingly crosscut by contradictory and hybrid cultural constructs of religion, ethnicity, nationalism, lifestyle, and gender. The culture of the popular classes can be opposed as “alienated” or “backward” by their supposedly counterpart intellectuals, as has been the case with arabesk culture. At the same time, regressiveness and racism can become popular among the subordinated, as is epitomized in the Sivas massacre and the rise of a popularized nationalist fervor suppressing the Kurdish issue. It is not just because the official, public political sphere in Turkey is so very restricted that social conflicts have been increasingly expressed in the language of culture since the 1980s; the politicization of culture itself has been a major factor in and consequence of the project and process of Turkish modernity from its inception. In that sense, the contradiction that inheres
in the formation and appraisals of arabesk culture continue with Turkish society: the contradiction between a dominant nationalist and paternalist incapacity to live with difference and a deep, unrealized popular capacity to change and accept difference through hybridization.

In conclusion, a few questions may be asked, based on the foregoing discussion, that allow a rethinking of the Turkish path toward modernity. How far can the mode of articulation of arabesk, during both its subversive and its hegemonic periods, be considered a metaphor for that path? Does the culture of migration of Turkish laborers living in Germany include a structure of feeling that resembles arabesk, although it may be lived in inflected forms owing to different social contexts? The two questions can be combined into the same question that Stuart Hall asks: “What stays the same when you travel?”

What has stayed the same in people’s physical and symbolic travel along the capitalist modernization path, from the Ottoman Empire to the republic, from the village to the city, or from Turkey to Germany?

And what has happened to the popular democratic demand to live in dignity that was articulated in the visions and blueprints of the left—wing cultural and political movements of the 1960s and 1970s? If there was anything substantial in this modern demand, when and how will it return? What new subjectivities, languages, sounds, and counterpolitical public spheres will give it voice? And with what new attitudes and discourses will intellectuals and scholars receive this new subversive popular voice?

Endnotes

Note 1: “Arabesk” (French, arubesque; Italian, arbesco), meaning “made or done in the Arabic fashion,” refers to a complex, ornate design of intertwined foliate or geometrical figures used for ornamentation (American Heritage Dictionary, s.v. “arabesk”). Back.

Note 2: Throughout this article the terms “popular,” “popular culture,” and “popular tradition” are used as they are defined by Stuart Hall in his “Notes on Deconstructing the Popular,” in G. S. Jones et al., eds., People’s History and Socialist Theory, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981, 227–40. Back.

Note 3: Because the main centers for producing classical music were closed down, there was no officially sanctioned arena for education in this genre until the State School of Turkish Music was established in 1976. When Turkish musicians working in the music market attempted to revitalize Turkish music, some of them looked to the Egyptian model, which was grounded in synthesizing Western and Ottoman classical musics.

During the Second World War and into the 1950s, Egyptian and Indian films became immensely popular in Turkey. These films offered well-known singers as leading characters in stories about good, poor people who were oppressed by the evil rich. Lyrics from these movie soundtracks were translated into Turkish, and similar songs began to be composed by some Turkish musicians. Some of them, such as Sadettin Kaynak and Selahattin Pinar, were very famous and are now considered classical Turkish composers. At the time, however, they were not held in high regard by orthodox classical musicians. Back.


Note 5: Although there was conflict between state–controlled radio and private music institutions, the interaction between them cannot be ignored. From the end of the 1930s, both the music halls and recording studios, on one hand, and state radio, on the other, became de facto music schools in the absence of other public institutions. If musicians worked in both arenas, they adapted to two different modes of performance, one popular, the other official. Moreover, the singers performed both Turkish art songs and folk songs—the vast collection of which was made by experts working at the radio and in the People’s Houses—until the 1950s, when musicians began to differentiate between these music traditions. These crossovers and the mixed music programs performed at the music halls had an effect in the blending of the folk and art music elements later in arabesk. Back.
Note 6: The vocal technique of sliding over notes is a characteristic feature of Turkish art music. This is most apparent in the classic gazel form, which was banned from state radio but was popular in gazinos (music halls) and films. A single rhythm eventually pervaded the arabesk scene and became known as “arabesk rhythm,” which is typically a düyek played double time, although other variations of düyek, alongside different rhythms, were used by Gencebay himself. Back.

Note 7: A few examples of lines from Gencebay’s most popular songs of the 1970s illustrate the yearning for a good life: “We are only guests in this world/So we can only behave like guests.” “You may not like the garips/But don’t ever look down on them/It is such a shame that man serve man.” “Love is happiness/Love is life itself/So you let us live.” “Down with this world/Let the dream end/Shame to the days without love/Every drop of tear is a protest of my years/Every drop of happiness is a protest from my heart/Justice is what we are after/Oh God, let this cruelty stop/I don’t ever want anything from the oppressor/But God, you are the Almighty/So you give me consolation.” Back.

Note 8: The traditional view, for example, that it was shameful for man to serve man, which is articulated in Gencebay’s lyrics, was even made into the political slogan “Enough with man serving man” by the Turkish Workers’ Party in the mid–1960s. Back.

Note 9: Nature and social issues have long constituted a “decor” in the feelings of the folk poets, as Pertev Naili Boratav points out in his Folklor ve Edebiyat, Istanbul: Adam Yayinlilik, 1982, 356–59. In the mani form, social norms are upheld if they reinforce love, and one would be justified in resisting them if these norms appear to hinder love. See İlhan Başgöz, Folklor Yazıları, Istanbul: Adam Yayınları, 1986, 232–39. Back.


Note 11: Beginning in 1971, musical films starring arabesk singers began to be called arabesk films. For the most part, these films did not differ from other musicals. In arabesk films, however—especially in Gencebay’s—there was a real tension between traditional values and the need to resist injustice, generally caused by a traditional figure who was powerful and wealthy. The usual solution for Gencebay was to take justice into his own hands, as he did in his 1975 movie Down with This World (Batsin Bu Dünya). Back.

Note 12: Titles of songs and lyrics from Orhan Gencebay’s repertoire entered popular culture as slogans and were also put on stickers. These stickers, as well as postcard snapshots of famous arabesk singers, were important decorations inside and outside the minibuses, trucks, and taxis run by the migrants. Back.


Note 16: The two surveys were conducted by SIAR for the Motherland Party in 1987 and 1988. Back.

Note 17: Because all former political parties were banned by the National Security Council after the 1980 coup, this catch–all kind of politics worked well as political alliances were reconstituted under the few officially permitted new parties. The strength of neocconservative–neoliberal politics thus arose out of the 1980 coup, which also undermined the 1961 Constitution and the other major democratic laws. Leaders of the coup chose a “Turkish–Islamist synthesis” as the new binding ideology. Although this ideology was not all–pervasive, it had a strong impact on the shaping of political and cultural movements and institutions after the 1980s. The Motherland Party took 45 percent and 36 percent, respectively, in the 1983 and 1987 national elections. This included the majority of the gecekondu votes, which, in the 1970s, were going to the social democratic Republican People’s Party. But in later elections Motherland Party’s share fell to 20 percent of the votes cast. Back.

Note 18: There are some important similarities between Thatcherism and Özalism. When Stuart Hall describes how Thatcherism “stitched together a contradictory juncture between the logics of the market and possessive individualism, on the one hand, and the logics of an organic conservatism, on the other,” he could just as well have been writing about Özalism. See Stuart Hall, “The Toad in the Garden,” in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds., Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture, London: Macmillan, 1988, 35–57; the quotation is from 53. Back.

Note 19: Taverna music, which takes its name from the music hall, grew with arabesk. It proved immensely popular after new technology import laws were enacted in 1983. The music is inexpensive to stage, relying
on a single singer with a synthesizer and a drum machine. The musician sings different popular songs of the day, one after another, chatting with the guests in the intervals while they eat, dance, and entertain themselves. Back.

Note 20: Gencebay has said that the entels are different from intellectuals in that they talk and write about social phenomena (arabesk, in this case) in ignorance and with lack of respect. Back.

Note 21: In the early 1990s, in the seaside public space of Ortaköy, a neighborhood of Istanbul, fights broke out between the marginalized youths of the area and the university students who had created a bohemian community there. Back.

Note 22: The issue of male identity in this vortex of change is a complex one. For rural migrant men, the former hierarchy of family roles began to disintegrate in the city. Men now had to deal with unemployment, working wives, and daughters who wanted to go more public. Women of all ages seemed to balance the contradictory demands better and gain a sense of empowerment, although this was not accomplished without pain. They became major forces in the demands for an improved urban infrastructure and social services in their neighborhoods, as well as for strengthened human rights for their imprisoned or missing children. Back.

Note 23: At the very end of the 1970s, when the dominant discourse on the “tastelessness and backwardness” of arabesk was being formulated, Engin Ergönültas insisted that arabesk was an expression of the protest of the lumpen proletariat; see his “Orhan Gencebay’dan Ferdi Tayfur’a Minibüs Müzigi,” Sanat Emegi, no. 15, May 1979, 5–22. Murat Belge was the first to point out that arabesk is a composite genre and that its formation is more complex than the prevailing appraisals asserted; see his “Arabesk’in Öyküsü,” in Tarihten Güncellige, Istanbul: Alan Yayincilik, 1982, 399–415. Back.

Note 24: The issues of migration and of lifestyles in the gecekondu neighborhoods have been portrayed in both auteurist and popular commercial films. The tradition of alternative caricature has been the main area of insight in this matter, but gecekondu life was also uniquely narrated in Latife Tekin’s novels. Back.

Note 25: The term “alienation” in the dominant discourse was used without scrutiny as a synonym for “anomie” or “degeneration.” Studies based on marginality theory that affirmed the existence of “alienation” in the migrant attitudes were not supported by the empirical findings on migrant attitudes in the work of the prominent sociologists Mübeccel Kiray, Tansi Senyapili, and Kemal Kartal, who showed that “fatalist and traditional attitudes were not continuous.” Kiray argued that more analytical research was needed. See her Toplumbilim Yazilari, Ankara: GÜIBF Yayinlari, 1982, 172–74. The sociologist Orhan Türkdoğan, however, who studied Erzurum gecekondu, took a “culture of poverty” approach and argued for a perceived “philosophy of resignation” that complemented the struggle to earn a living in the gecekondu “sub–cultures.” See his Yoksulluk Kültürü, Erzurum: Atatürk Üniversitesi Basimevi, 1974, 174. Back.


Note 28: The 1994 “Fadime’s Song” (Fadime’nin Türküsü), by Ferdi Tayfur, seems to reflect publicly, for the first time, a nostalgia for village life. When interviewed about this song, Tayfur complained of the crowded, dirty, ugly city and its water shortage and contrasted it with an image of the village as clean, friendly, and now packed with the latest in technology and facilities. See Cem Sancar, “Hadi Gel Köyümüze Geri Dönelim!” Aktüel, no. 159, 1994, 68–71. Back.

Note 29: See the discussion between Stuart Hall and James Clifford about “travel and dwelling,” which follows Clifford’s “Travelling Cultures” in Lawrence Grossberg et al., eds., Cultural Studies, 1992, 112–16. Back.

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