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Arabesk Music in Turkey in the 1990s and Changes in National Demography, Politics, and Identity

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ABSTRACT *This article examines the history of arabesk (in English spelled “arabesque”) music in Turkey. In the formative years of the Turkish Republic and beyond, arabesk music was an object of disapproval for the country’s Westernized, secularist, and urban mainstream because of its connections to Eastern and Arab culture. Today arabesk is one of the most popular music forms in the country. This article argues that the genre’s newfound popularity has resulted from demographic and political changes, such as the integration of rural migrants into urban society and the country’s struggle to gain acceptance in the European Union.*

In present-day Turkey, the most popular genre of music enjoyed by the mainstream of Turkish society, including the middle classes and Westernized elite, is known as arabesk (in English spelled “arabesque”).¹ According to a recent estimate, 150 out of the 200 million cassettes produced each year by the Turkish recording industry are of the arabesk genre.² The popular Turkish newspaper *Güneş* has claimed that 90 percent of Turks now listen to arabesk.³

The fact that arabesk music has become so popular with the Turkish elite and mainstream initially appears ironic.⁴ While the Turkish mainstream and urbanized elite have for over 70 years borrowed much of their identity and cultural tastes from the West, arabesk is Anatolian, Arab, and Kurdish—in a word, Eastern—in its origins. From the 1950s through the 1970s, its main consumers were urban migrants from the rural Anatolian hinterlands, a part of Turkey that was to a great extent left out of the country’s 20th-century Westernization process. To date, no writer has provided a sufficient explanation for this phenomenon in musical tastes that reflects significant changes in mainstream Turkish identity and politics.

This article will explain how arabesk music, a formerly marginalized art form and the object of outright disdain by elites, has become so popular in Turkey. It will further explain why arabesk is not only immensely popular but has also become a powerful and politically relevant form of music for the very elites which once discredited and even loathed it.

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The first half of this article will argue that arabesk is popular with the Turkish mainstream of today for two major reasons. On one hand, in the 1990s, the musical genre changed somewhat to incorporate elements more commonly associated with Western-style pop music and culture. Changes in this regard must be credited to a great degree for arabesk's newly found popularity. That is, more people may listen to arabesk today than they did in the 1950s simply because they like the "new" format of this musical genre.

On the other hand, there is a political and social dimension to this new popularity. While arabesk has become more Western, it still retains many of its original and essential Eastern characteristics. That mainstream Turkish society now appreciates arabesk music, in spite of its unmistakable Eastern features, shows that many Turks do not feel threatened by manifestations of Eastern culture as they once did. Many are even willing to embrace the music on account of its Eastern or "oriental" qualities.

The second half of this article will take the political and social dimensions of the present argument a step further and argue that Turkish elites, originally the bastion of anti-Easternism in their country, are now embracing arabesk at a time when they feel more than ever estranged from "the West," or at least at a time when they have become doubtful of "the West's" commitment to them.

This is not to say that the urbanized, Westernized Turkish elite has in the last five to ten years begun to associate itself more closely with the Anatolian heartland—or, put another way, that the Westernized Turkish elites have "gone native" in their own country. Turkish elites are still elitist and Turkish society still remains socially and ideologically divided along religio-political and class lines. Nevertheless, the rise of arabesk's popularity shows that an impressive proportion of Turks in middle and upper class urban society now find something praiseworthy (or at least likeable) in their Eastern roots and in the cultural expression of those roots through arabesk.

Even for the many Westernized Turks who do not openly admire or admit to an Eastern heritage, it is at least very notable that such people do not disdain arabesk as they once disdained everything ostensibly Eastern. To demonstrate these important points about changes in Turkish culture, tastes, and identity, the following sections explore the history of arabesk's ascendance and highlight the specific ways in which the Turkish mainstream society has embraced this musical and cultural genre.

Westernization, Secularism, and Elitism in the Early Turkish Republic, and the Implications for Popular Culture

In the 1920s, the reformist leaders of the Turkish Republic created a political and ideological climate inhospitable to forms of popular culture which were essentially Eastern in origin. In July 1924, President Mustafa Kemal Atatürk asserted that the "new" Turkish culture would be freed from "the superstitions and the foreign influences of the East" which were, in his view, "alien" to the "innate character" of the Turks.⁵ The staunchly secular and Western character of the new Turkish regime, led by Atatürk and the Republican People's Party (RPP), has become well known through the works of scholars of modern Turkish history.⁶ Under the influence of the

new, secular, pro-Western, and nationalist discourse known as Kemalism, reforms affected every sphere of public life and almost every aspect of society, from the way ordinary people dressed, to their written language and the way they prayed.

The pro-Westernism, anti-Easternism, and elitism of the new Turkish regime was important for the sphere of popular culture in general and for forms of cultural expression with Arab, Islamic, or southern Anatolian⁷ origins in particular. Efforts went into creating a pure Turkish culture, one stripped of the Arab elements in the old Islamic-Ottoman culture.⁸ This was particularly the case regarding music. Atatürk wanted Turks to listen to symphonies, operas, and oratorios for the same reasons that he wanted them to wear Western clothing and to use the Latin alphabet. In the new Turkish Republic, Turks were to welcome Western music because, unlike Eastern music, it was logical and rational.⁹

In the area of cultural reform, music became a contested arena in the struggle between Western modes of cultural expression—radiating from elite and urban spheres—and Eastern modes of the cultural expression—radiating from the grassroots portions of society. In these years, Turkish musicians, allied with the modernization effort, created a “national” music that synthesized traditional Turkish folk music and Western music.¹⁰ One of the primary supporters of this process was Ziya Gökalp, considered by many to be the intellectual father of modern Turkish nationalism.¹¹ Following the ideas of Gökalp, Atatürk encouraged a group of young composers to pursue their education in the West so that upon coming back to Turkey they could orchestrate Anatolian folk melodies in a Western manner. The new generation of national composers included prominent musicians such as Adnan Saygun, Ulvi Cemal Erkin, and Cemal Reşit Rey. In 1923, the Istanbul Conservatory of Music added a Western music department to its faculty and closed the Eastern music department. The reformists’ efforts reached such heights at the various conservatories that students caught playing “Eastern” melodies were punished.¹²

Although reforms in classical music and conservatories touched mainly the upper echelons of Turkish society, reforms in national broadcasting had the more widely felt impact on patterns of music consumption at the popular level. Radio was especially instrumental in the dissemination of modernization ideas. According to Nazife Güngör, at the height of nationalist reformism, there were approximately 5,000 registered radio sets in rural Turkey—a substantial number for that time.¹³ These radios broadcasted educational programs that focused on the new Turkish language, history, and folklore as well as the newly approved musical genres representing Turkey’s “European” identity. In keeping with this trend, “Eastern” music was banned from state radio airwaves in 1934.¹⁴

Musical Tastes Outside of the Cities and Government Reactions

While reform efforts geared towards modernizing Turkish society were rather successful at the political centers, principally in Istanbul and Ankara, they did not enjoy commensurate measures of success and acceptance in the eastern and southern

parts of Turkey. Villagers and small town dwellers continued to maintain certain traditional elements of culture that found root in an Arab-Islamic heritage.¹⁵ Western classical music that was aired from radio stations had little appeal in the rural areas. More popular in rural Turkey was Egyptian radio, which aired Arab music.¹⁶

Egyptian-Arab music became the preferred music of many Anatolian rural dwellers. Meral Özbek, Martin Stokes, and Nazife Güngör have drawn attention to the influential role that Egyptian music played in the formation of arabesk. As mentioned, many rural Turks chose to tune into the Egyptian radio when the state-imposed music alternative seemed unsatisfying. The songs of many of Egypt's most famous crooners, such as Abd al-Wahhab and Farid al-Atrash, were translated into Turkish.¹⁷ Egyptian musical films were also a crucial vehicle for the dissemination of Arabic music, dance, and rhythms. Between 1936 and 1948, 130 Egyptian movies were shown in Turkey.¹⁸ The music in these movies possessed an oriental tonality with which traditional Turks in the rural parts of the country easily identified. The soundtrack of the famous Egyptian movie "Tears of Love" became one of the best selling records in Turkey during the 1930s.

The state's efforts in the 1940s to curb the popularity of Arab-inspired music were forceful but limited in efficacy. By the late 1940s, the pro-establishment forces of the state realized the extent to which the music choice of the rural Turks was influenced by Arabic or Islamic sources. Thus, in 1948, the pro-Western leaders of the Republic banned not only the importation of Egyptian films but also the broadcasting of Egyptian music on radio. Rather than curbing the appeal of an Arabized musical genre, this ban prompted the creation of an industry in Turkey which translated and imitated Egyptian music.

Arabic songs were never understood by the majority of Turkish speakers, but the systematic translations into Turkish dramatically increased the popularity of these songs. As Turks became increasingly able to memorize the songs and sing along, the songs came to speak more to the hearts and minds of the listeners. Turks started to see this music as more of their own, especially since it was from a culture perhaps more similar to theirs than the one being imposed on them by the new governing elites.

Urban Migration: Arabesk's Flourishing in the Cities

Arabesk might never have posed a challenge to the Turkish establishment's pro-Western, nationalist discourse had the processes of economic liberalization and urbanization not brought thousands of migrants from the east and south to Turkey's principal cities in the 1950s and 1960s. The introduction of arabesk into Turkish cities was a cultural phenomenon ushered in by important political and economic developments of these two decades. The primary motor of change in these years was the new Democratic Party. This party ushered in a new era of economic liberalism and modernization that led to massive urbanization, which involved mass migrations from rural to urban parts of the country. In the 1950s, the Democratic Party eliminated trade barriers and intensified industrialization and public work projects.

The building of new factories and heavy industrialization generated a huge demand for labor that was met by urban migrants. The total population of Turkey rose from 21 million people in 1950 to 31 million in 1965.¹⁹ Correspondingly, the urban population, only 25 percent of the overall national population in 1950, rose to 35 percent in 1965. Between 1950 and 1960, the population of the four largest cities in Turkey increased by 75 percent. Notably, one out of every ten villagers migrated to the urban parts of the country during the 1950s.

The growing popularity of arabesk must be understood against this background of profound social and demographic change and the acute dislocation experienced by urban migrants. The social and demographic shift resulting from waves of urban migration caused much open confrontation between what Çağlar Keyder has referred to as the “peripheral” and the “central” cultures of urban Turkey.²⁰

According to Ayşe Öncü, “the social and cultural divisions of city life in Istanbul solidified around the separation between urbanites, residing in central neighborhoods of apartment dwellings, and peasants, living in village-like squatter settlements on the periphery.”²¹ The attitude displayed by established families in big cities towards migrants aggravated the latter’s dissatisfaction. Established city inhabitants, both middle and upper class, regarded the migration phenomenon as “an invasion of the ‘peasants.’”²² They complained about the disappearance of city manners. For their part, the migrants were removed from the secure, friendly environment engendered by the proximity of their family and friends in villages. They were ill-prepared for the traumatic social and cultural change of the big city.²³ In this environment, arabesk found a new home in Turkish cities.

During the migration phase of the 1950s and 1960s, music provided an outlet and a source of emotional comfort for migrants. According to Craig Lockard, using music to assert defiance and alienation is often natural for communities that do not identify with the cultural projects of a given country.²⁴ Unlike established urban people, the migrants were predisposed toward a form of culture that echoed their regional attachments and not those of the reformist governments. Around this time, the Turkish recording industry grew significantly and provided opportunities for arabesk singers. The albums of arabesk singers gained popularity among the migrants in the cities. When the Turkish music industry provided an outlet for the creative expression of those excluded from state-controlled media and culture, arabesk made its way into the cities.

At the time, arabesk was considered to be a hybrid of Arab and traditional Turkish (or “folk”) music. Its melodic constructs are drawn from the repertoire of Arabic modal theory, known as *makam*. According to Orhan Gencebay, considered one of the founders of arabesk, arabesk means “in Arab style” (*Arapvari*) or “Arab influence” (*Arap etkinliği*).²⁵ As its name suggests, arabesk evokes or draws upon notions of Arabness in Turkish society. It does this through the use of sounds and styles associated with Arab culture. As put by Martin Stokes, the “style of vocal delivery” in this music is felt by Turks to be highly “Arabized.”²⁶ According to Irene Markoff, “the instruments used for arabesk and the general compositional approach are heavily influenced by Egyptian mainstream music referred to as *musiqā sharqiyyah*.”²⁷

Arabesk songs are based on the contrast between instrumental and vocal sounds. Soloists are accompanied by large orchestras. The use of a large chorus to give greater contrast to the solo singer is an artistic genre borrowed from Arab music. As Martin Stokes argues, the regular antiphonic alternation of a large chorus of string instruments with a solo voice is a consistent feature of Egyptian popular music.²⁸ Moreover, arabesk songs evoke rhythms that echo Egyptian and Indian rhythms. Reyhan Dinlettir, the *tabla* player for the famous arabesk singer Ferdi Tayfur, owes his artistic inspiration to Egyptian rhythm players and Indian *tabla* virtuosi.²⁹ In his interview with Ahmet Hakan, Orhan Gencebay states that he used rhythmic patterns from Egyptian music for his own composition. Music critics go one step further and suggest that Gencebay emulated Egyptian music to the point of plagiarizing at times.³⁰

Lyrics of arabesk songs frequently express passionate desires for a beloved one who is presumed to be unattainable. Ferdi Tayfur sings in a popular song: “Painful news is heard quickly / a dagger is thrust into my breast / she has another lover / my heart burns / I weep blood.” Similarly Orhan Gencebay’s famous song “Give Solace” (*Bir Teselli Ver*) contains the following verses: “I am already an addict of every grief / I am drunk with my lifelong endless torment / I cannot smile, my love / I cannot live without you.” In another well-known song, “The Trick of My Fate” (*Kaderimin Oyunu*), Gencebay sings: “Does this life come to an end with suffering / with this loneliness and suffering / I will wait, I will wait / even if she does not return.”

According to Martin Stokes, arabesk songs helped many migrants to keep alive the memories of their villages. Arabesk music softened the cultural blow “for those traveling from the hybrid peripheries to the Turkish center.”³¹ The early arabesk songs were filled with lyrics that told stories of southern migrants trying to make a living for themselves in big cities. In his famous song “Fadime’s Wedding” (*Fadime’nin Düğünü*), Ferdi Tayfur sings, “We came to the city with such hopes / hope God will see to it that our end is blessed.” As Stokes states, the protagonist of early arabesk was invariably from rural parts of Turkey, who lived in a *gecekondu* and sang about his sad life in the city.³²

Arabesk song lyrics have traditionally given insight into how peripheral peoples viewed themselves within the larger Turkish society. The songs have often expressed feelings of powerlessness and vulnerability; they have addressed the difficulties faced by traditional men in their effort to preserve their traditional values and honor, particularly when confronted by industrial employers and fast women of the modern world. As a result, they are tormented by feelings of despair and agony. The lyrics of Ferdi Tayfur’s famous song “You Took My Mind Away” (*Aklımı Başımdan Aldın*) illustrate this point: “You took my mind away / you did not leave me any thoughts / you made me a captive of your wishes / when you smiled in my eyes / you created a world in me / why did you darken my world / if all you were interested in was a fleeting desire?”

Orhan Gencebay’s record entitled “Give Solace” (*Bir Teselli Ver*), released in 1968, was a major breakthrough for arabesk. The record sold over 600,000 copies.

This was a significant event, given that chart-topping musical artists at the time were selling around one million copies per record.³³ The primary consumers of Gencebay's music were urban people connected in one way or another to the urban migration phenomenon. Musical instruments such as the *bağlama* (the long-necked lute) and the *kanun* (the trapezoidal zither) produced sounds that resonated with people of Anatolian roots. It reminded them of "home."³⁴ Also, Gencebay's lyrics appealed to the urban dwellers with an Eastern heritage. According to Meral Özbek, "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."³⁵ From the way he dressed to the way he wore his mustache, Gencebay resembled the quintessential migrant. By the early 1970s, he was a hero to fans who nicknamed him lovingly Orhan Baba, or Father Orhan.

How and Why Arabesk Succeeded

Today, arabesk no longer reflects primarily the sentiments of antagonistic, marginalized, conservative, or socioeconomically depressed people in Turkey. It has become a musical genre appreciated and consumed by Turkish people of every social, economic, political, and religious (or irreligious) kind. It has transcended class barriers and won approval from a broad section of Turkey, including the Westernized elite. According to Meral Özbek, it was in the 1990s that arabesk was fully "admitted to the world of legitimate entertainment and was assimilated by the culture industry."³⁶ A 1989 issue of the popular magazine *Tempo* featured many intellectuals who were willing to admit publicly that they were fans of arabesk music.³⁷ It is significant that Turkish intellectuals support arabesk, because for many years they were considered to be the torchbearers of Kemalism. As put by Özbek, "*Arabesk* can be heard in music halls and blaring from cassette players in minibuses and taxis, and it can be enjoyed in workplaces in the informal sector, in squatter homes, and in drinking establishments."³⁸

To the observer of modern Turkish history, the ascendance of arabesk and its acceptance by the urban mainstream is striking. In the 1970s it was perhaps inconceivable that a musical genre with Anatolian, Arabic, and arguably Islamic roots would become the substance of top-selling records and the subject of the country's most popular television shows. Yet this is precisely what happened to arabesk, and it is a phenomenon that requires explanation.

On one hand, the change has to do most simply with the fact that arabesk music itself changed somewhat in the 1980s and 1990s to incorporate sounds, messages, and lyrics more closely associated with Turkish pop music. Arabesk singers began to style themselves after Turkish pop stars on their video clips and cassette covers. Reproducing tunes and styles associated with Turkish pop is one reason why over time arabesk became more popular with audiences better accustomed to Western forms of music.

On the other hand, arabesk never lost many of its original and essential characteristics. Its increasing popularity with the urban mainstream reflects changes in Turkish

society and culture as much as, if not more than, changes in the music itself. That mainstream Turkish society now appreciates arabesk music in spite of its unmistakable Eastern features shows that people do not feel threatened by manifestations of Eastern culture as they once did, and that many are in fact even willing to embrace the music on account of its Eastern-ness.

To support these arguments, the following section draws partially upon responses to a questionnaire submitted to 85 people in Turkey. The questionnaire comprised nine questions, each of which were designed to elicit from the respondents explanations as to why they or others listen to arabesk.

- (1) Which of the following music genres do you listen to and how frequently? (multiple choice)
- (2) If you marked arabesk, when did you begin listening to it? (multiple choice)
- (3) Where do you listen to it? (multiple choice)
- (4) Do you listen to the melody or the lyrics? (multiple choice)
- (5) What sort of feelings does arabesk evoke in you? (multiple choice)
- (6) Do you think arabesk gained popularity in 1990s? If so, why?
- (7) When you think about arabesk, do you think of the following singers? Any others? (multiple choice)
- (8) Do you think that arabesk is more than a musical genre? Can it be qualified as a lifestyle?
- (9) Do you think Turks have an affinity for arabesk music? If so, why?
- (10) (Questions about personal information: age, sex, profession, education, neighborhood, etc.)

Of the 85 respondents, 39 were women and 46 were men. The ages of the respondents ranged from 18 to 57. The majority of the respondents fell between the ages of 25 to 35. The respondents were comprised of university students, white-collar professionals (e.g. lawyers, businesspeople, and teachers), and blue-collar workers (e.g. taxi drivers, housemaids, and factory workers). They lived in a diverse range of neighborhoods, from Bebek, a wealthy section of the city inhabited by upper class Turks, to Alibeyköy, a poorer neighborhood.

Assimilation of Elements of Western and Turkish Pop

Arabesk music became more popular in the late 1980s and 1990s as many of its principal artists began to incorporate elements from Western and Turkish pop music. Turkish pop enjoys immense popularity in Turkey. As one survey respondent points out, “arabesk music started to bear a lot of resemblance to Turkish pop music. Now, arabesk songs use a lot of disco-style rhythms. This has allowed it to reach a wider audience.” Perhaps the best example of this is İbrahim Tatlıses’ single “One by One” (*Tek Tek*), which topped Turkey’s Billboard charts in April of 2003. The tempo, rhythm, and discothèque feel of the song made it closely resemble contemporary Turkish pop songs, particularly because it was infused with electronic

dance beats. Yet the song mixed these elements with very traditional arabesk elements, such as the extremely prominent zither and lute, loud *tabla* drums, and lyrics that describe feelings of acute loneliness. The song was heard all over Turkey and became so popular that it was played regularly for over a year in Istanbul's most chic nightclubs. Changes of this nature explain why the famous Orhan Gencebay song "Damn This World" (*Batsın Bu Dünya*) became the most requested song in high-end nightclubs after it was remixed with dance beats.

As arabesk became a more commercial genre and somewhat more similar to Turkish pop, the songs became less melodramatic in their lyrics and message. For example, new arabesk singers also focus on the subject of love, but the nature of love that they sing about changed in the 1980s. In the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, arabesk singers sang about their unreciprocated love for the girls of the modern world—i.e. the fast girls of the modern world—who rejected them because of their traditionalism. In the 1990s, arabesk singers were very much a part of the modern, urban society. Their songs no longer focused on the subject of two lovers separated by class, status, and culture. Instead, the love songs were like so many love songs produced in Western pop industries—the men sang about women they loved who simply didn't love them back. The focus on cultural dislocation was mostly lost.

The images of many of arabesk's newest singers now resemble those of Turkey's biggest pop stars. One survey respondent remarked that one of the major moves arabesk singers made to gain popularity was the decision to "dress like Turkish pop stars," which made them "more pleasing to look at." Emrah and Özcan Deniz are among the primary examples of arabesk singers who have transformed themselves in the last five years to look more like Turkish pop stars. They wear jeans, Ray-Bans, and high fashion clothing. More significantly, they have shaved off their mustaches. They now produce music videos like those of the Turkish pop stars, with beautiful women, suggestive plots, and images of luxury. A recent video by the Kurdish arabesk star Mahsun Kırmızıgül depicts him vacationing in the Caribbean with a sensuous blonde model.

Arabesk's incorporation of electronic dance beats and stylistic elements of Turkish pop has also led, in some respects, to a watering down of the genre's potency, uniqueness, and Eastern character. An outstanding example of this is seen in the career of Müslüm Gürses. Originally one of the "hard-core" arabesk singers of his generation, Gürses revolutionized his image when he agreed to contribute to an album entitled "Songs that Gave Promise" (*Söz Vermiş Şarkılar*). In the album, Gürses worked closely with Turkish pop stars and sang a song written by Murathan Mungan, a famous Turkish lyricist closely associated with Turkish pop. The record made Gürses more popular than ever, and the lesson of his success continues to resonate in the arabesk industry. Today, arabesk singers who incorporate elements of pop into their music and images enjoy high levels of popularity and record sales. By contrast, arabesk performers who have rejected the incorporation of pop have found themselves considerably less popular. This group includes Gökhan Güney, Küçük Ceylan, and Ahmet Kaya.

All of this is not to deny that arabesk continues to exist as an independent musical genre. It still retains its most definitive characteristics. Its defining instruments—zither,

lute, and tabla—still distinguish the genre from Turkish pop, which does not feature these instruments. Also, as in the past, arabesk is still distinguished from pop on account of the social and ethnic origins of many of its principal singers. The late 1990s witnessed a proliferation of new singers who closely resembled the successful forefathers of the musical genre. Singers such as İbrahim Bala and Hakan Gürses not only styled themselves after İbrahim Tatlıses and Müslüm Gürses, but also took on the same names to acquire fame and fortune. Other singers such as İbrahim Erkal and Hakkı Bulut modeled their cassette covers on those of Orhan Gencebay by posing with their *bağlamas*. Reproducing images of well-established artists secured newcomers such as Lutfi Doğan, İbrahim Erkal, and Seyfi Doğanay record sales close to one million.

Social and Political Dimensions

While the incorporation of Western pop elements provides one fairly straightforward explanation for the success of arabesk, there are other, more complex reasons for this success which are related to changing social and political circumstances in contemporary Turkey. The ascent of arabesk can only be understood fully when examined against the background of important political and social factors tied to changes in urban demography, Turkish identity, and regional politics.

Today, one can no longer talk about a stark divide between the periphery and the center in Turkish society.³⁹ As one survey respondent put it, “The divide between migrants and city people has disappeared. With their integration into the cities, the ‘profile’ of Turkish society has changed. Now, there are a lot of Turks listening to *arabesk* because this music is the cultural expression of this new ‘profile.’” Another respondent averred that “migration has led to the mixing of peoples and cultures” and that “the producers of *arabesk* music benefited the most from this phenomenon.” Profound demographic and social changes in this area of Turkish life have had important consequences for changes in popular culture and the newfound popularity of arabesk.⁴⁰ In essence, arabesk music was a primary beneficiary of urban migrants’ political de-marginalization and cultural penetration.

There are yet other important questions pertaining to the social and political context of arabesk’s urban and mainstream reception. While arabesk singers made certain changes in their music to appeal to a wider audience, is it possible that people in Turkish cities somehow changed to adapt to arabesk? Or, more specifically, did Turkish identity change at all during the 1990s in such a way as to accommodate the infiltration of a genre like arabesk?

A number of survey respondents suggested a linkage between the rise of arabesk and issues pertaining to Turkish identity. Seven survey respondents said that discernible shifts in the conception of Turkish identity during the 1990s facilitated the popularization of arabesk. The final question of the survey asked, “Do you think Turks have an affinity for arabesk music? If so, why?” Five respondents pointed to the Ottoman Empire as a common bond, while others pointed more generally to common social, religious, and cultural customs. According to one respondent, “Turks and Arabs were the subjects of the Ottoman Empire for many years; it is

only natural that Turks were influenced by Arabs when it came to creating cultural forms of expression.” These findings from the survey correspond to the findings of Meral Özbek, who says that with arabesk, the Turks “Finally found a name to express the identity problem of Turkish society.”⁴¹

The issue of Turkish identity is one that has been well covered by scholars of Turkish history.⁴² According to many of them, Turkish identity is hybrid insofar as it weaves together aspects of Western and Islamic identity. As put by Hakan Yavuz, Turkish identity is “neither Islamic nor European but incorporates elements of both.”⁴³ Such a notion corresponds to the findings of the survey on arabesk. Survey respondents argued that the national Turkish identity, to the extent that there is one, was caught more than ever between East and West. In the words of one respondent, Turkey has had an “uncertain” identity because it is made up of “two competing and at times conflicting sources [Western and Islamic] of culture, institutions, and images.” Perhaps this phenomenon is experienced more by some members of society than others. However, it seems to be a national phenomenon nonetheless.

An overwhelming proportion of respondents argued that Turkish identity is essentially “Eastern,” regardless of political changes that took place in the 20th century. In the words of one respondent who identified himself, interestingly, as a banker from Istanbul, “We [the Turks] enjoy *arabesk* because at the end of the day we are peoples of the East.” In the words of another respondent, “Turkey provides a bridge between the East and the West, but we should keep in mind that 95 percent of the country is located on the East. Let us not fool ourselves; we are Eastern people.” Certainly this kind of perspective would indicate a change from the Kemalist perspective on Turkish identity that dominated the 20th century. A preponderance of the respondents, in answering this final question, attributed the success of arabesk to similarities and essential affinities between the Turks and Arabs. This is significant given that since the establishment of the Republic, mainstream, urban Turks have fervently eschewed ties with the East and with the Arabs, and instead have preferred to assert their Western and European heritage.

Respondents went further still in their attempts to explain arabesk’s success as a ramification of Turkey’s Eastern-ness. Several argued that because the Turks are Eastern people, they enjoy the “fatalistic” and “emotional” aspects of arabesk. In saying this, the respondents seemed to be relying on conventional “wisdom” in Turkey that Westerners are rational and calculating while Easterners are irrational and emotional. According to one respondent, “As a nation we [the Turks] are very emotional, we enjoy arabesk songs because they cater to our emotional psyche.” In addition, some of the respondents claimed that Turks tend to be fatalistic and thus enjoy the fatalistic messages of arabesk songs. One respondent states (rather fatalistically), “As a nation, we are comprised of peoples who succumb to any given circumstance because we believe that to be our destiny.” When respondents attribute the popularity of arabesk to the Eastern features of Turkish identity, it suggests that they, as modern Turks, do not feel threatened by the music and its potential implications for the national culture.

Many Turks today from various walks of life seem to view arabesk as an outlet for their frustrations. Arabesk has always served this purpose for a portion of its

listeners. For urban migrants in the mid-century, lyrics about hope, despair, and fate spoke to their feelings of alienation and powerlessness. In the words of Meral Özbek, “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.”⁴⁴ The volatile economic situation affected lower and middle classes alike.⁴⁵ It is noteworthy that arabesk has now come to serve as an outlet for both the urban middle classes and more privileged Turks.

The popularity of arabesk music in present-day Turkey shows that feelings of marginality or exclusion are not peculiar to the lower class urban dwellers. One possible reason that mainstream Turks have turned to arabesk and have become more accepting of an Eastern form of culture is that they are increasingly finding themselves marginalized within the Western context of which they so much aspire to become a part. In the words of Martin Stokes, the increased participation in arabesk is indicative of “where Turkey and the Turks stand in the world.”⁴⁶ The politics of the European Union have played a significant role in the increased tension between Turkey and the West. Until now, the European Union’s refusal to grant Turkey equal membership status has led to feelings of frustration, especially among the upper-middle and elite classes. Amikam Nachmani has claimed that “by 1997, a growing number of Turks no longer identified with the West or defined themselves as Europeans.”⁴⁷ As for the connection between such feelings and the popularity of arabesk, Meral Özbek explained the linkage lucidly:

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.”⁴⁸

One survey respondent suggested that Turks listen to arabesk because they feel themselves to be an “ill-treated” people and “a stomped-upon nation.”⁴⁹ Another respondent comments that “as a nation, Turks are children of pain. They have been slapped (*tokatlandılar*) by different people at all different periods in history.” Yet another survey respondent stated, “The Turkish nation is very unfortunate. Nobody loves us.” Orhan Gencebay’s lyrics “There’s no soul without flaws / Love me with my flaws” received widespread appeal because many in Turkey thought that the lyrics were symbolic of the unrequited Turkish love for the West. Representative of the soul, Turkey sought to attain love (that of the West) despite its inherent flaws.

It is interesting, if mostly coincidental, to see that Turkey’s failure to integrate more easily into Europe has also been manifested in the field of international music competitions. Since 1975, Turkey has entered the “Eurovision” song 25 times with the hope of ranking in the top three. Each year, officials in the Ministry of Culture elect one artist to represent Turkey at the contest. For over 25 years, Turkish artists almost always placed last; Turkish artists made it to the top ten only twice between

1975 and 2002.⁵⁰ In 2003, for the first time, a Turkish artist won the competition. However, the artist, Sertap Erener, won the competition by performing an English song called “Every Way that I Can.” To some, this was a pyrrhic victory for Turkey, a sign of cultural weakness, and a sign that the country can only really be accepted by European countries if it imitates them.⁵¹

Martin Stokes has written on the subject of the Eurovision contest, “I often hear the sentiment that if only Turkey were to enter one of its own [folk] singers, Turkey would win, or would succeed in demonstrating that there was no need to compete on terms laid down by others in a musical language which was entirely alien to them.”⁵² It is noteworthy that arabesk has flourished in this fairly new kind of atmosphere in Turkey, one characterized by a new kind of tolerance and revived openness to ostensibly Eastern forms of culture and expression. This is a cultural, social, and political atmosphere that has clearly changed since the earlier days of the Republic when arabesk music was banned on national television and radio. People seem no longer to be ashamed of arabesk, but rather they appear to see in it something admirable.

With these perspectives in mind, what can one say about linkages between the rise of arabesk and issues of contemporary Turkish identity? While the mainstream of Turkish society may not be entirely ready to resign itself to an Eastern existence, or want to give up its claims to Western cultural orientation, arabesk has made aspects of Turkey’s Eastern identity seem more palatable. Today, as Hakan Yavuz and Doğu Ergil have argued, it is difficult to talk about a single Turkish identity. Turks appear to possess several levels of identity. According to an example provided by Doğu Ergil, “A resident of Istanbul might be a descendant of the Byzantine Empire, an ethnic Greek or Armenian whose family lived through centuries of Ottoman rule and is now a citizen of the Republic of Turkey. He or she may be Christian or Muslim or Western-oriented, with aspirations to be a member of the European Union rather than a member of the Middle Eastern polity.”⁵³ Given the absence of a fixed Turkish identity, there are some Turks who identify themselves as more Eastern than Western and some who identify themselves as more Western than Eastern.

Notably, it is difficult to pin down a national identity in Turkey today. Yet as has been seen, certain trends in the consumption of popular culture indicate some broad lines of consensus or agreement about the state of Turkish identity. In this regard, it is noteworthy that so many people in Turkey today listen to arabesk. The consumption of arabesk reveals something about how Turkish society at large feels about both the West and the East.

Arabesk, Turkish Identity, Music, and Society

Studying the history of arabesk illuminates important changes that have taken place in Turkish demography, popular culture, and identity over the last 50 years. This genre of music developed against a background of significant demographic changes in modern Turkey, specifically during the waves of urban migration between the 1950s and 1970s. Arabesk has always been associated with identity, particularly with that of urban migrants. One of the significant aspects of arabesk is that it came

to be appreciated by wider segments of Turkish society which previously were ambivalent or even hostile to urban migrants and their culture. As this article has argued, the gradual acceptance of arabesk is related to economic, social, and political changes that have made urban migrants more a part of society and their culture more palatable to a wider Turkish audience.

It would be difficult to say that arabesk has itself dramatically changed identity in Turkey or that it has been a primary force in changing politics. These would be overstatements. However, it would not be an overstatement to say that arabesk has encouraged and popularized certain developments in Turkish identity. It would be reasonable to suggest that arabesk has served to legitimize a kind of Turkish identity, namely, that of the Eastern-oriented Turk.

As arabesk gradually became more popular, its artists brought certain latent identities or aspects of Turkish identity to the fore. In tandem with this, culture and cultural attitudes in Turkey shifted. Arabesk has helped to make Eastern aspects of Turkish identity and life seem more palatable, or even praiseworthy, to a broader segment of Turkish society.

Notes

1. The term arabesk acquired a wider range of meanings in Turkey during the 1980s. It can denote a musical genre, a film genre, and a certain type of lifestyle. This paper focuses on the musical arabesk. For more information about the wider usage of the term arabesk see Ayşe Öncü, "Global Consumerism, Sexuality as Public Spectacle, and the Cultural Remapping of Istanbul in the 1990s," in Deniz Kandiyoti and Ayşe Saktanber (eds.), *Fragments of Culture: The Everyday of Modern Turkey* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), pp.184–86.
2. *Cumhuriyet*, August 25, 1988.
3. *Güneş*, August 26, 1990.
4. By mainstream, the author refers to lower middle, middle, and upper–middle class in Turkish society.
5. Andrew Mango, *Atatürk: The Biography of the Founder of Modern Turkey* (London: John Murray, 1999), p.314.
6. Niyazi Berkes, *Atatürk ve Devrimler* [Ataturk and Reforms] (Istanbul: Adam, 1982); *Türkiye'de Çağdaşlaşma* [Modernization in Turkey] (Istanbul: Doğu-Batı Yayınları, 1978); *The Development of Secularism in Turkey* (London: Hurst, 1998); Erik Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History* (London: Tauris, 1998); Geoffrey Lewis, *Modern Turkey* (New York: Praeger, 1974); Arnold Toynbee, *Turkey* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1976); Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961).
7. Due to its proximity to Syria and Iraq, southern Anatolia is regarded as having been imbued with Arab-Islamic elements. In addition, most of the Kurdish population in Turkey lives in southern Anatolia.
8. Mango, *Atatürk*, p.503.
9. Metin And, "Atatürk and the Arts with Special Reference to Music and Theater," in Jacob M. Landau (ed.), *Atatürk and the Modernization of Turkey* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1984), p.220.
10. Ali Ucan, "Music Education in Turkey in the Republican Period," *Turkish Review*, Vol.2, No.8 (1987), pp.75–98.
11. Naim Turfan, *The Rise of the Young Turks: Politics, the Military and the Ottoman Collapse* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000), pp.303–6.
12. Nazife Güngör, *Sosyokültürel Açından Arabesk Müzik* [Arabesk Music through a Socio-Cultural Perspective] (Ankara: Bilgi Yayınevi, 1990), p.66.
13. *Ibid.*, p 55.

14. Martin Stokes, "Turkish Arabesk and the City: Urban Popular Culture as Spatial Practice," in Ahmed Akbar and Hasting Donnan (eds.), *Islam, Globalization and Postmodernity* (London: Routledge, 1994), p.25.
15. Richard Tapper (ed.), *Islam in Modern Turkey: Religion, Politics and Literature in a Secular State* (London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 1994), p.7.
16. Martin Stokes, "Introduction," in Martin Stokes (ed.), *Ethnicity, Identity and Music* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1994), p.12.
17. Martin Stokes, *The Arabesk Debate: Music and Musicians in Modern Turkey* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p.94.
18. Ibid.
19. Kemal Karpat, *The Gecekondu: Rural Migration and Urbanization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p.59.
20. Çağlar Keyder *State and Class in Turkey* (London: Verso, 1987), p.137.
21. Ayşe Öncü, "Global Consumerism," p.185.
22. Ibid, p.184.
23. Karpat, *The Gecekondu*, p.59.
24. Craig Lockard, "Popular Musics and Politics in Modern Southeast Asia," *Asian Music*, Vol.27, No.2 (1996), p.151.
25. Ahmet Hakan, *Orhan Gencebay: Ne Olur Sev Beni* [Orhan Gencebay: Please Love Me] (Istanbul, Birey, 2001), p.26; Ertan Eğribel, *Niçin Arabesk Değil* [Why Not Arabesk] (Istanbul: Süreç, 1984); Nazife Güngör, *Sosyokültürel*.
26. Stokes, *The Arabesk Debate*, p.109.
27. Irene Markoff, "Popular Culture: State Ideology, and National Identity in Turkey: The Arabesk Polemic," in *Cultural Transitions in the Middle East* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994), p.230.
28. Stokes, *The Arabesk Debate*, p.168.
29. Ibid., p.193.
30. Markoff, "Popular Culture," p.231.
31. Stokes, "Islam, the Turkish State and Arabesk," *Popular Music*, Vol.11, No.2 (May 1992), p.217.
32. Stokes, "Turkish Arabesk and the City," p.22.
33. Güngör, *Sosyokültürel*, p.125.
34. Ahmet Oktay, *Türkiye'de Popüler Kültür* [Popular Culture in Turkey] (Istanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 1995), p.257. Mehmet Torun, "The Shared Sound of Turkish and Middle Eastern Music: The Lute," in *Economic Dialogue: Turkey* (Istanbul: Dialog, 1986), pp.212–16.
35. Meral Özbek, "Arabesk Culture," in Sibel Bozdoğan and Reşat Kasaba (eds.), *Rethinking Modernity and National Identity in Turkey* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), p.215.
36. Özbek, "Arabesk Culture," p.221.
37. Markoff, "Popular Culture," p.234.
38. Özbek, "Arabesk Culture," p.218.
39. Sencer Ayata, "The New Middle Class and the Joys of Suburbia," in Deniz Kandiyoti and Ayşe Saktanber (eds.), *Fragments of Culture: The Everyday of Modern Turkey* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), p.40.
40. Ahmet Oktay, *Türkiye'de Popüler Kültür*, p.258.
41. Meral Özbek quoted in Ayşe Öncü, "Istanbulites and Others: The Cultural Cosmology of Being Middle Class in the Era of Globalism," in Çağlar Keyder (ed.), *Istanbul: Between the Global and the Local* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), p.111.
42. See, for example, Sibel Bozdoğan and Reşat Kasaba, "Turkey at a Crossroad," *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol.54, No.1 (2000), p.2; Doğu Ergil, "Identity Crises and Political Instability in Turkey," *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol.54, No.1 (2000), pp.43–62; Amikam Nachmani, *Turkey: Facing a New Millennium* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), pp.86–121; Philip Robins, *Turkey and the Middle East* (London: RIIA, 1991), pp.3–16.
43. M. Hakan Yavuz, "Cleansing Islam from the Public Sphere," *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol.54, No.1 (2000), p.27.

44. Özbek, "Arabesk Culture," p.216.
45. Almost half of the population accounts for one seventh of the Gross National Product. For further details see Nachmani, *Turkey*, pp.78–81. Douglas Howard, *The History of Turkey* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001), p.167.
46. Martin Stokes, "Sounding Out: The Culture Industries and the Globalization of Istanbul," in Çağlar Keyder (ed.), *Istanbul: Between the Global and the Local* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), p.123.
47. Nachmani, *Turkey*, p.56.
48. Özbek, "Arabesk Culture," p.213.
49. The expression in Turkish is "Türk toplumu ezilmiş bir toplum."
50. In 1986, ninth place; in 1997, third place.
51. Ahu Erkivanç Yıldız, "Love Me with My Flaws," *Turkish Time*, Vol.17 (2003), available at www.turkishtime.org.
52. Martin Stokes, "Place, Exchange, and Meaning: Black Sea Musicians in the West of Ireland," in Martin Stokes (ed.), *Ethnicity, Identity, and Music: The Musical Construction of Place* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1994), p.102.
53. Doğu Ergil, "Identity Crises and Political Instability in Turkey," p.44.