

MUSICAL LIFE STYLES OF MIMARSINAN GYPSIES IN TURKEY*

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Abstract:

This study introduces the outcomes of oral history and field research based on the experiences and memories of the Gypsies residing in Istanbul, Mimarsinan district. Mimarsinan Gypsies have migrated to Turkey after the compulsory relocation determined by the terms of Lausanne Treaty signed with Greece in 1923.

The settled Roma/Gypsies people adopt, transform and “Romanize” the local music of the place where they settled and also spread their music used before the settlement or the music of the place from where they immigrated.

Therefore, the Roma/Gypsies people living in different parts of the country have different kinds of musical life forms which are determined by the musical instruments, which are used in the performances, performed and listened music styles, the settings where the music is performed and listened, and the dances.

Key words: Gypsies/Roma people, Musician, Mimarsinan, Turkey.

There are more than twenty words, in Turkish, used for Gypsies. Some of them are “Cingene”, Kıpti”, “Posa”, “Karacı”, “Roman” etc. Because they are adopted from other languages, most of these words can be explained by an etymology of foreign source (Yıldız, 2007, s. 61-82). But mostly, Gypsies in Turkey are called “Cingene” or “Roman”. According to the official figures, the number of the Gypsy population in Turkey is around 500 thousand (according to unofficial figures, it is around 2 million). 95 % of this population is not pursuing a settled life. Gypsies in Istanbul live in specific “mahalles” (neighborhoods), as “Kasimpasha” – “Curukluk”, “Kucukbakkalkoy”, “Sulukule”, “Uskudar Selamsiz”, etc. Besides the sedentary Roma/Gypsy, there are the nomads who leave the places they lived in towns, and they start following a pre-established itinerary, from spring to autumn, due to occupational reasons (Oprisan, 2002).

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In 1923, in the course of the population exchange between Turkey and Greece, many Gypsies immigrated to Turkey and among those, a considerable number of Romanies/Gypsies from Thessaloniki and its surroundings have immigrated to the region of Thrace. Mimarsinan is one of those places in Thrace upon where the immigrant Gypsies have crowded.

Mimarsinan is a little neighbourhood on the European side of Istanbul bordering the E-5 highway towards Thrace and it is governed by the Municipality of Büyükçekmece, a town which is named after the lake Büyükçekmece. There is a big Gypsy community in this neighbourhood. The Gypsies who live here are entirely the Rumanian Gypsies that have emigrated from Thessaloniki in Greece. The Roma/Gypsy communities here, who have communally migrated to that neighbourhood as a matter of the population exchange that took place between Turkey and Greece in 1923, lead a settled form of life here contrary to the ever-migrating life style of Roman Gypsies (Kolukırık, 2006, 2009). One of the sharing and distinguishing characteristics of local Gypsy communities who live in different parts of the world, is them having subsistence strategies, setting on several occupational fields corresponding with ‘tradesmanship’. Ursari (bear traders) in Balkans, Kalderari (metal workers) in Roumania, Shoshorava (tinner) in Poland, are several examples of common occupational fields and professions with other Gypsy communities from different territories. Similar examples from Turkey are Demirci (metal workers), Kalayci (tinner), Sepetci (basket makers), Canbaz (animal/horse traders), Ayici (bear traders), and certainly Çalgıcı (instrumentalist) as a most sharing profession that related with music making. These names also reflect group identities define by occupational fields among Gypsies (Yükselsin, 2000, s. 73-78; Yükselsin, 2009, s. 453-463). Like everywhere in the world, the word “Roma” connotes “musician” in Turkey. But the musicianship word includes a different meaning here. It means *Çalgıcılık* (instrumentalist). “The terms of *Çalgıcılık* (instrumentalist) and *müzişyenlik* (musicianship) are different concepts. The term *Çalgıcı* Roman signifies a group identity, forming as a dominant professional factor, and is also a model of musicianship that more related to music making by instrument playing among Roman communities in Western Turkey” (Yükselsin, 2009, s. 453-463). Being a musician is an inherited job, it comes from the family, and it passes from father to son, elder to younger. Among the Gypsies in every region, there are families that lead their lives with music who depend on music for a living. Musicianship, passing from father to son by the master-apprentice system, is the utterly indispensable feature of Gypsies in the society. Gypsies, who are an important cultural richness of our country, continue to exist in the neighbourhood of Mimarsinan likewise everywhere in Turkey. Ninety percent of the Gypsies of Mimarsinan are working as musicians and musicianship is the most important economical source and form of employment of that society.

Mimarsinan Roma musicians are all men and they play at least one instrument. They inherit this occupation from their fathers in the master-apprentice style. However, it is not always the case that a clarinet player's son necessarily becoming a clarinet player. For example, while Recep Ustaoglu is one of the significant clarinet players (Ustaoglu R., 2004) of his neighborhood "Mimarsinan", his son (Ustaoglu V., 2004) is playing the keyboard which is among the popular instruments today. Shortly; no matter if they play the same instrument or not, there is usually at least one musician in most of the families. There has never been a female musician in Mimarsinan Gypsies. This observation has been verified in the conversations held with them. Women's interest in music is merely comprised of dancing in weddings and such gatherings. Women of Mimarsinan Gypsies have never had the occupation of dancing to lead their lives which is a usual phenomenon in other Roma communities. Apart from working as cleaning ladies in richer households, - which is a recent phenomenon of the last few years-, there is no form of employment that the Roma women are occupied with. A great percentage of them are housewives. Occupations such as dancing, selling flowers, reading palms and fortunetelling, which Roma women are known for in order to earn their lives are not seen in Mimarsinan Roma community. The reason for this could be the effort for not being dismissed by the non-Roma community in Mimarsinan. Men work for bread to fulfill the needs of their family and women look after their children and take care of the household. This life style is the one that is applied by the others (non-Gypsies) in Mimarsinan and the Gypsies of Mimarsinan seem to have adopted this lifestyle.

Mimarsinan Gypsies work only as musicians, but unfortunately there are not enough opportunities to perform and earn their living on a regular basis. For this reason they get temporary or seasonal jobs of performing music. Mimarsinan neighbourhood and Büyükçekmece Town are popular places for tourists so Roma musicians have the opportunity to find employment in the area in venues of entertainment such as night clubs and restaurants which are especially popular during summer time. A certain number of Roma musicians get to perform in weddings, in pre-marriage parties such as henna nights, in parties given a night before men go to military service, namely on special occasions (Ustaoglu R., 2004; Zurnacı S., 2004-2010). Folkloric dance competitions, which are held on a regular, periodical basis in Turkey, are good opportunities of performance for Roma musicians and some of the Mimarsinan Gypsies participate in folkloric dance shows or competitions (Zurnacı S., 2004-2010). The instruments that the Mimarsinan Gypsies play can be counted as: violin, kanun, oud, hanging drum, darbuka, zurna, clarinet and keyboard. Especially keyboard has become a very popular instrument since it can be used to substitute many other instruments (Ustaoglu V., 2004). But, among the non-Roma

community in Turkey, due to the self-sufficiency of keyboard as an instrument in performances and thus due to its being more economical in weddings and such occasions of entertainment compared to having an orchestra doing the same job, treating keyboard as the sole instrument have become a wide-spread trait among musicians and employers. But, the Mimarsinan Gypsies use the keyboard alongside with other instruments to increase the richness of instrumentation (Ustaoğlu V., 2004; Ustaoğlu B., 2004).

Gypsies accord with the musical structure of the place they live. The music that the Mimarsinan Gypsies perform is thus, alongside with the music of the region they live, the popular pieces of music which are nowadays frequently performed in Turkey. But, it can be observed that the music to be listened to and the music to dance with are of different styles. It is observed that, as the music to be listened to, the style called *arabesque*, which can have all sorts of different rhythmic patterns, is the one that is preferred as the music to be listened to. However, to dance with, it is observed that they prefer unique sorts of music with rhythmic patterns of 9/8's. Weddings, which give one a good opportunity to observe and appreciate the music, performance of instruments and dances, are very important occasions for Mimarsinan Gypsies just as they are for most societies. Our research among Mimarsinan Gypsies via the recordings we made at weddings and the conversations we held with them concerning music and all the events concerning music can be summarized as follows: The weddings of Mimarsinan Gypsies take place on the streets open to public. A stage-like place is prepared for musicians in the central square of the neighbourhood. The musicians who start to perform early in the afternoon take turns and play non-stop until late at night and everybody has loads of fun. Although in general all the musicians who are to play at the wedding are chosen from among the Mimarsinan Gypsies, sometimes guest musicians are come from the neighbouring villages. This is a kind of solidarity among musicians. At those weddings where musicians play taking turns (taking shifts), the average number of musicians that perform per a wedding night is fifteen (Ustaoğlu Ş., 2004; Zurnacı S., 2004-2010).

The number of instruments that are used in performance throughout the weddings is at least ten and more than one instrument of the same kind can be used. Among these instruments of performance there are violin, kanun, clarinet, keyboard, cümbüş (a banjo-like instrument with the same system as oud), hanging drum and darbuka and vocals accompany these instruments. Since the number of instruments and performers appearing at a wedding are indicators of the economical power of the owners of the wedding, it is a matter of prestige to have a bigger number of them and a factor that increases the respect they're shown among the Roma community. Thus, especially at the weddings the more musicians and instruments there

are, the more immaculate the wedding is and therefore the more respectable its owner is.

Roma women are invited to dance at the dancing area by ladies called “meydancı”¹. The ladies who are called *meydancı* are hired by the wedding owners to lead and take care of the crowd at the wedding area where the dancing and entertainment takes place. In return for their service, they get goods like clothes or some gifts from the wedding owners. The ladies who are called to dance at the meydan (dancing area), dance until a second call by the *meydancı* ladies. The banknotes or coins which are thrown over the heads of the dancing ladies by the wedding owners or the guests are again collected by the *meydancı* ladies and given to the musicians (Ustaoğlu E., 2004; Ustaoğlu S., 2004). The musicians on stage who are entertaining the guests have fun themselves too. More significantly, the improvisational changes that the musicians on stage spontaneously make on the lyrics, rhythmic structure or melody of an already existing song are among the most important features of Roma musicians. Mimarsinan Gypsies lead a settled life in this region where they have immigrated to. Although most Roma men are performing musicians, due to the economical difficulties concerning making a living out of it, they are observed to prefer jobs that offer permanency and regularity. It is sometimes even the case that Roma people who have found jobs as described (permanent, regular) totally abandoned musicianship (Ustaoğlu M., 2004; Ustaoğlu B., 2004).

There are Gypsies who live in Mimarsinan who have not acquired music as a profession to earn money for a living although they are living inside music and are directly concerned with music throughout their entire lives. These Gypsies work in the factories nearby as workmen. The main reason that they prefer this occupation is its permanence and the social security it brings about such as the ability to retire. It has been observed that all the instruments being performed throughout Turkey are also being performed by the Gypsies living in this region. The most important reason why they learn to play all these different varieties of instruments is not only the artistic interest in those particular instruments but their belief that doing so would increase their chances of earning money.

Roma women living in Mimarsinan, differing from other Roma women in the society, do not have anything to do with dancing -belly dancing in particular- as a profession. Again, occupations such as “bohçacılık” (door-to-door selling of textile garments), selling flowers or fortunetelling which are unique to Gypsies and especially Roma ladies as professions are not observed in lives of Roma women of Mimarsinan, they

¹ Since the weddings are held at the central squares of the neighborhood, “meydan” is the name given to that agora-like area, the central square and thus “meydancı” happens to mean something like beholder of that area.

simply do not perform those professions. Women dance only for their own enjoyment in special occasions like weddings, parties, etc.

As a result of our research; the lifestyles, clothing styles, family values, the way of talking and many other aspects of Mimarsinan Gypsies dramatically differ from the general, usual style that are typical for Gypsies. Day by day, it will be more and more difficult to differentiate the Mimarsinan Gypsies from other communities living in the region of Thrace. Certainly they can not be said to have lost all their traditions but they seem to have penetrated through the other communities living in the majority of Thrace Region.

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