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Discovering One's Self Through Embodiment of Tradition in *Meşk*: An Analysis of the Mode of Transmission in Turkish Performative Traditions ¹

ABSTRACT

Meşk is a polysemic concept that originates from traditional Turkish music and denotes both an embodied mode of transmission and a participatory performance style that characterizes Turkish performative traditions. As a traditional mode of transmission, it is the face-to-face training method that is based on the pupil's faithful repetition/imitation of the master's performance. As a performance style, it combines repetition with innovation, as it is based on improvisation according to already existing traditional patterns. This idiosyncratic correlation between repetition and change in *meşk* produces a unique aesthetics, in which the performers search for the new that does not get old. This search is connected to the mystical teaching of tasavvuf that is particular to Turkish culture. Following tasavvuf's objective of discovering one's self through disciplining the soul by disciplining the body, the performers of Turkish traditions search for their selves through practicing the arts they try to master. In this manner, they act as a part of the traditional chain that maintains heart-to-heart transmission of spirituality.

KEYWORDS

Turkish performative traditions

Transmission

Meşk

Embodiment

Spirituality

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Introduction

One of the most important factors that determine the characteristics of an art form is how it is transmitted. Thanks to scholars who have done research for many years on traditional performing arts of Asia, today it is a well-known fact that the transmission of these arts largely depends on culture-specific methods that prioritize face-to-face, live interaction between master(s) and pupil(s). In this mode of transmission, the pupils are supposed to learn an art by imitating/emulating the performance of their masters.

The focus of this study is the mode of transmission that is particular to the traditional performing arts of Turkey. The arts in question include practices of making music, singing, storytelling, dancing, drama, puppetry, and ritual, which co-exist in various combinations in different genres. These genres are *meddahlık* (urban-based one-man storytelling), *çadır hayal* (puppetry), *kol korçak* (hand puppetry), *karagöz* (shadow puppetry), *ortaoyunu* (urban-based theatre), *köçeklik/çengilik/curcunabazlık* (urban-based dances), rural-based theatre, rural-based dances, *semâ* (Mevlevi ritual), *semah* (Alawite ritual) (And, 2003; And, 2004), *musiki* (urban-based music and singing) (Behar, 2014), the tradition of *saz* (rural-based music and singing), and *âşıklık* (rural-based one-man storytelling with music and singing; minstrelsy) (Başgöz, 2008). Whereas today some of these genres are practiced only in a limited or revived context (*meddahlık*, *karagöz*) and some are not performed at all (*çadır hayal*, *kol korçak*, *ortaoyunu*, *köçeklik/çengilik/curcunabazlık*), other traditions are still living. As studying all these genres within the scope of this article is not reasonable, this research focuses on the genres of music —*musiki*, the tradition of *saz*, and *âşıklık*, which is closely related to and might even be considered as a part of the tradition of *saz*.

Although, in terms of transmission, Turkish performative traditions share basic features with other traditional performing arts in Asia, I would like to avoid the emergence of an orientalist approach that would melt all Asian culture in the same pot. Therefore, I focus on an emic concept that is used to denote the mode of transmission in question —*meşk*. *Meşk*, which is a word of Arabic origin, primarily denotes the face-to-face teaching method in Turkish traditional arts, in which the pupils are expected to observe and imitate/emulate their masters' art as it is. Traditionally, learning a

tradition from a master through *meşk* takes many years and demands a lot of patience from the pupil (Behar, 2014; Gill-Gürtan, 2011; Karahasanoğlu, 2012; Özcan, 2004; Serin, 2004). Nevertheless, *meşk* is a polysemic concept that implies more than just a teaching method or technique. In traditional Turkish music, which is at the focus of this study, it also denotes the actual performance itself, which is an all-encompassing event that does not exclude the teaching, but engrossingly includes the improvisatory creation. One of the most important characteristics of *meşk* as musical performance is being/doing together (Behar, 2014). This renders *meşk* a “participatory performance”, which is defined by musicologist and anthropologist Thomas Turino as having “no artist-audience distinctions”, so that in its purest realizations there are “only participants and potential participants” (2008: 28). *Meşk* is characterized by another important feature of the participatory performance as well —it is not/cannot be fixed or predetermined (Turino, 2008), as it is shaped by the conditions of here-and-now. In *meşk* performances, musicians improvise by selecting from a range of already-known repertoire of traditional patterns according to certain structural conventions, as well as the momentary actions/reactions of the participants (Behar, 2014).

It is intriguing that *meşk*, which is characterized by faithful repetition as a teaching method, also has space for improvisation and creation, and thus change and innovation as a performance style. Within the scope of this article, I would like to analyze this double-sided nature of *meşk* that is based on an elusive correlation between repetition and change. I argue that this correlation gives Turkish performative traditions their primary characteristics. The performers of these arts search for the new within what already exists. This search is also a search for one’s self. Being effected by *tasavvuf* —a mystical Islamic teaching that is particular to Turkish culture— they try to discover their self not only as an artist in the tradition but also as a human being in the world. I argue that, in this manner, they act as vehicles for carrying and transmitting a specific kind of spiritual sensibility through embodying the tradition in *meşk*.

Oral or Embodied Transmission

The face-to-face, live mode of transmission from a teacher/master to a student/pupil is usually referred to as oral transmission in reference to theory of orality.² However, is this term really proper and sufficient for identifying the phenomenon that is being discussed? In their recent study on the transmission of Japanese music and dance, Bruno Deschênes and Yuko Eguchi (2018) raise this question. Putting emphasis on the fact that the transmission of these arts is based more on imitating a master corporeally rather than following verbal instructions, they suggest a new term that would include the concept of embodiment into theory of orality:

There is much more to orality than the oral transmission of knowledge. The acting, moving, learning, feeling, and knowledgeable body play crucial roles beyond what is being transmitted. In fact, a large part of such knowledge cannot be simply put into words. It can be that the master possibly does not want to put it into words or that it is better learned without any verbalization, forms of theory, explanation, or rationalization. [...] Within this practice, the term “orality” is somewhat insufficient, or even inappropriate, because of its reference to the use of verbalization and rationalization. Instead, we suggest “embodied orality” as a more suitable term than “simple orality” (Deschênes and Eguchi, 2018: 59).

This attempt to re-define the term ‘oral transmission’ by the inclusion of embodiment is quite significant for the analysis of Turkish *meşk*, as it is also based on the pupils’ imitation of what the masters actually do in front of them, rather than following certain instructions or explanations (Behar, 2014; Gill-Gürtan, 2011; Karahasanoğlu, 2012; Özcan, 2004).

Historically, *meşk* as a teaching method was first used in traditional calligraphy. In this context, it literally means a piece of calligraphy, which is given by the master to the pupil as a model for learning through imitation (Behar, 2014; Gill-Gürtan, 2011; Serin, 2004; Tüfekçioğlu, 2014). Although at first sight this might look like a literate teaching method, even in calligraphy *meşk* follows the basis of embodied orality; the pieces that are given to the pupils for practice are written by the masters in front of the pupils so

² When a musical tradition is in question, the studies might instead use the terms aural transmission or oral-aural transmission.

that they can observe how hand and brush move (Tüfekçioğlu, 2014: 112). Over time, the term has been employed by other art forms as well. In the musical context, *meşk* denotes teaching and learning without notation, but only by imitating/emulating the live performance of a master. During a usual *meşk* class in the tradition of *musiki*, the master performs certain musical pieces in front of the pupil, who is expected to listen attentively, then immediately imitate what the master just played/sung to the best of the pupil's ability. It is important to note that the pupils are not allowed to practice alone till the next *meşk* so that they will not learn the pieces incorrectly (Behar, 2014; Özcan, 2004). Nevertheless, this is not simply a superficial imitation of the master's art by the pupil. As Deschênes and Eguchi put forward,

[i]n much Asian thought, a pupil does not simply imitate or reproduce what is being taught but reconstructs and reappropriates it as if discovering it within the body or, more specifically, the self. [...] What one learns is not simply a technique but a way to imprint it within the body (2018: 72).

In other words, what a pupil learns from a master in face-to-face, live mode of transmission is how to 'embody the tradition'. What is expected from the pupils is not mechanically imitating what is being taught but internalizing it so that the tradition begins to live in their bodies. This process of embodiment, whose sine qua non condition is a direct, live interaction between master and pupil, includes the internalization of not only explicit artistic features, but also implicit aspects of an art form, which are connected to social, cultural, emotional, and even spiritual values and sensibilities. In the Turkish context, these implicit aspects are conceptualized as *âdâb*.

Embodiment of *Âdâb*

Âdâb is a polysemic concept in Islam that denotes "a quality conduct that is cultivated or learned" (Gade, 2007: 39) — in other words, knowing how to behave properly as a refined person. In the context of Turkish traditional arts, it additionally means specific rules and subtle nuances of an art (Bayındır, 1988). In fact, as a specific kind of behavioral knowledge, *âdâb* is closely related to embodiment. A Turkish idiom that is used to denote "know how to behave" is, "know how to sit (down) and stand (up)" (*Sesli Sözlük*, 2019d).

This connection of *âdâb* with embodiment attracts the attention of anthropologist Rebecca Bryant (2005) in her article on the contemporary practice of the tradition of *saz* in the urban circles of Istanbul. Referring to her own apprenticeship of *saz* — general name given to musical instruments in Turkey, especially a stringed instrument (*Sesli Sözlük*, 2019f)—, Bryant recounts that in this context learning music is strongly related to a process of constructing one’s self or what she calls “empersonment”:

[L]essons were about much more than learning to play the *saz*; they were about learning to become the type of person who could play the *saz*. This is a process that I call here “empersonment”, a process that is realized through a discipline by which one consciously and consistently imprints a practice on the body (Bryant, 2005: 223)

In order to elaborate on her argument, Bryant cites Ira Lapidus, who claims that *âdâb* “bears the meaning of the Latin, *habitus* —an acquired faculty, rooted in the soul” (Lapidus, 1984: 53, as cited in Bryant, 2005: 234). She states that, unlike Pierre Bourdieu’s *habitus* that works at the unconscious level (Bourdieu, 1984: 466, as cited in Bryant, 2005: 237), *âdâb* implies a conscious disciplining of the soul through disciplining of the body with “constant practice and repetition” (Lapidus, 1984: 55, as cited in Bryant, 2005: 234). This is, in fact, what ideally happens in *meşk*. As Bryant explains, “an important part of learning the *saz* involves memorization” but “that memorization is pointless without an aesthetic, within which the songs memorized can be decoded” (2005: 228). A good *saz* pupil does not just repeat, but acquires the aesthetic ability to hear what is coded in the songs, that is, “the sensibility through which the songs are produced” (Bryant, 2005: 234). This ability is acquired “precisely through the memorization of songs” (Bryant, 2005: 228). In short, according to Bryant, becoming a good *saz* player “implies acquisition of an aesthetic, embodiment of a practice, and expression of one’s mastery of that knowledge in one’s behavior” (2005: 234).

In her article on historical and contemporary forms of performing *meşk* in Turkish music, Denise Gill-Gürtan (2011) makes similar observations regarding her own experience of learning *musiki*. As she argues, *meşk*

implies much more than lessons bounded in space and time. Indeed, more than repertoire was to be learned [...], as apprentices were also taught style, taste, and how to live (Gill-Gürtan, 2011: 616).

In the past, the scope of *meşk* was not limited to the study of music. A student was also thoroughly schooled in ethics, culture, socialization, respect, style, and “how to be”. Elements of this type of education are still present today, as two of my teachers insisted that I follow them to rehearsals, recording studios, and recitals to observe them and learn how to interact in diverse social settings. One teacher [...] demonstrated how important this “other” social education was by telling me that spending an hour drinking tea and talking with him was almost more important than spending an hour learning music from him (Gill-Gürtan, 2011: 620).

Apparently, here there is something that cannot be transmitted solely through teaching/learning musical pieces. In order to learn the tradition, the pupils are supposed to observe and emulate how the tradition is embodied by their masters beyond regular lessons, but in everyday life. Because, in this context, learning the tradition inevitably involves cultivation of one’s self. This fact connects *meşk* to the teaching of *tasavvuf*. Echoing Bryant’s (2005) and Gill-Gürtan’s (2011) analyses of learning Turkish music as a process of empersonment, *tasavvuf* is essentially characterized by the intention of ‘discovering oneself’ or ‘discovering one’s self’ as the ultimate purpose of a human being. Similar to other esoteric traditions, *tasavvuf* especially values face-to-face interaction between master(s) and pupil(s), as it supposes that the spiritual ‘secrets’ cannot be simply put into words or written down, but should be discovered by the devotees themselves in their own ‘self’. That is why the followers of *tasavvuf* have developed certain bodily practices, which would work as vehicles for the pupils on their long path towards discovering one’s self. Among them the arts of storytelling, music and dance play a prominent role. *Tasavvuf* is well-known for the special ritual called *semâ*, which is composed of praying, singing, music, and a special kind of whirling movement. It is important to note that specific lessons for teaching pupils how to perform *semâ* are also called *meşk* (Gölpınarlı, 2006).

This idea of self-cultivation or self-discovery in *tasavvuf* is largely embraced by traditional performing arts of Turkey. In his study that focuses on the ethics of *meşk* in *musiki*, sociologist Güneş Ayas points out that as a teaching system *meşk* aims to breed

not only a musician but also a “*kâmil insan*” (2015: 9) —a *tasavvuf* term, which can be translated into English as one “who has reached spiritual maturity” (*Sesli Sözlük*, 2019c). The tradition assumes that this spiritual maturity would be acquired through performing music for years, if not decades or a whole life, so that the pupil would be able to fully embody the *âdâb* of *musiki* and eventually become a master. It is true that in the system of *meşk*, due to the faithful repetition of a master, the pupils learn first to play and/or sing in their masters’ performance style. However, what is expected from them over time and eventually is creating their own original styles so that they can now be called a master (Ayas, 2015). In short, for becoming a master, a pupil is supposed to discover one’s ‘self’ in the tradition itself. This is what Bryant (2005) calls empersonment. As she explains, the type of apprenticeship she describes

entails a deliberate shaping of the self in the mold of traditional knowledge. [...] one empersons a body of knowledge that also contains a set of values, both ethical and aesthetic. As a person shaped by that body of knowledge, one works, lives, and innovates. [...]

Hence, an aesthetics of self, as the self-conscious process by which one undertakes self-making, depends on empersonment, or the recursive techniques of apprenticeship through which one habituates oneself in a tradition (Bryant, 2005: 234).

In this sense, through *meşk* the pupil discovers one’s self not only as an artist, but also as a human being. This renders the pupil a living vehicle for the transmission of not only an art but also the spirituality that is inherent in the art itself. This connection of transmission of traditional arts with the transmission of spirituality is summarized very well in a well-known Turkish idiom: “*Aşk olmadan meşk olmaz* (There can be no *meşk* without love)” (Behar, 2014; Gill-Gürtan, 2011). It is important to note that the precondition of discovering one’s self in *tasavvuf* is filling one’s heart with love, especially to God, and to act accordingly (Gölpınarlı, 2006).

Before going into the details of this phenomenon of spiritual transmission in *meşk*, I would like to discuss first why face-to-face interaction is a prerequisite for attaining artistic mastery in Turkish performative traditions. According to the bearers of traditional Turkish music, a notation is in no way sufficient for learning this art and the priority has to be given to taking *meşk* classes from a qualified master (Ayas, 2015;

Behar, 2014; Karahasanoğlu, 2012). One of the reasons underlying this claim is that the specific structure of Turkish music does not tolerate otherwise.

Makam: The Structure of Meşk

Turkish music is based on a specific structural system called *makam*, which is also known as *maqam* in the Arab world³ (Özkan, 2003; Touma, 1971). According to this system, each musical piece has to belong to a *makam*, although there can be infinite pieces in a *makam* (Behar, 2014; Özkan, 2003).

The dictionary meaning of *makam* is “location”, “station”, and “position” (Uludağ, 2003). In music, this basically corresponds to the existence of a predetermined spatial organization, which is particular to each *makam* and should be followed by all musicians. As Palestinian composer and ethnomusicologist Habib Hassan Touma explains,

[t]he development of a *maqam* is always determined by two primary factors: space (tonal) and time (temporal). The structure of a *maqam* depends upon the extent to which these two factors exhibit a fixed or free organization. The tonal-spatial component is organized, molded, and emphasized to such a degree that it represents the essential and decisive factor in the *maqam*; whereas the temporal aspect in this music is not subject to any definite form of organization. In this unique circumstance lies the most essential feature of the *maqam* phenomenon, i.e., a free organization of the rhythmic-temporal and an obligatory and fixed organization of the tonal-spatial factor (1971: 38).

These sui generis characteristics of *makam* system are often misunderstood by Western musicians. Touma points out how *maqam* “has sometimes been regarded as music improvised without form” as the musicians do not follow a score while performing (1971: 39). However, this is not improvisation in the Western sense, as the tonal-spatial structure of a *makam* is fixed. However, as no score is followed by the performers, unavoidably no presentation of a *makam* “can be identical to any other. Each time it is re-created as a new composition” (Touma, 1971: 47).

³ This system is known as *mugam* in Azerbaijan, *shash-maqom* in Uzbekistan, *dastgah* in Iran, and *raga* in India (Özkan, 2003; Touma, 1971).

A similar correlation between definite patterns and free organization is also active in how a story is told in the tradition of *âşıklık*. As explained by Turkish folklorist and *âşıklık* expert İlhan Başgöz (2008), an *âşık* (storyteller; minstrel) never repeats a performance twice. This does not mean that they create new songs and new stories each time they perform. Rather these storytellers select from already existing traditional patterns and re-compose them according to the moment, that is, when, where, and to whom the story is told. As a result, although the basic structure of the story is the same, the text of the story is created during the performance itself, fading away into the memory of the *âşık* when the performance is over. This is true also for *ortaoyunu*, *meddahlık*, and *karagöz* traditions, as the performers create a new text in each performance by improvising according to the moment (And, 2004; Arıcı, 2011).

But if a *makam* or a story is re-created as a new composition/a new text each time it is performed, then what the pupil has to learn from the master are apparently not scores or texts, but how to accomplish recreation in each realization. Certainly, acquiring such a skill is not easy. In order to be a master, the pupils have to learn the subtle rules of the art they are practicing. In the context of Turkish music, one of these subtle rules is related to the progression of intervals in the *makams*. Different from Western music, Turkish music has a microtonal structure and the location of frets might change microtonally when one moves between the intervals of a *makam*. These changes cannot really be notated, but have to be learned through live interaction with a master. The tradition of *musiki* calls this phenomenon *sır perdeleri* (Ayas, 2015: 90), which can be translated into English as “secret frets” or “frets of mystery” (*Sesli Sözlük*, 2019e; *Sesli Sözlük*, 2019g). This naming is not innocent of reason, as *sır* (secret; mystery) is a very significant term in *tasavvuf* (Uludağ, 2003). In fact, many terms in traditional music, including *makam* itself have been taken from *tasavvuf* (Ayas, 2015: 84).

In *tasavvuf*, *makam* denotes the symbolic stages —or stations— of a dervish, which s/he should pass on the path towards self-cultivation. According to this esoteric teaching, each *makam* is related to a certain emotion and living through these emotions is quite necessary for a dervish (Gade, 2007; Uludağ, 2003). Not surprisingly, the tradition of *musiki*, which is considered by *tasavvuf* as an important vehicle for self-cultivation, relates each *makam* to a specific emotion as well. In his article on the effects

of *musiki* on human beings, religious music researcher Ruhi Kalender (1987) draws attention to how theoretical works of the past have considered certain *makams* as capable of generating certain emotions in the hearts of audiences. Nevertheless, as he points out, scholars of the past were not interested in the *makams* as tools of entertainment or enjoyment, but they aimed to understand and explain how the human soul is fondled by music so that it is reminded of its connection with the sacred world:

[T]he soul comes to light through easily produced tunes and beautiful performance. Thus it remembers its relationship with the souls in the high rank and contiguity with the higher world. For this, it moves its body. It turns it like the heavens, at the same time it turns it to its source, from where it has come. As a matter of fact, Plato said [...]: when one listens to a musical work in its perfect form, s/he would be carried away and intoxicated due to the beautiful spiritual emotions it generates (Kalender, 1987: 361–362).

Considering all these facts about the *makam* system, it would be appropriate to argue that what is transmitted through *meşk* system in Turkish performative traditions is beyond artistic expertise, but involves a significant aspect of spirituality.

Heart-to-Heart Transmission of Spirituality

Although I have used it until now, the bearers of Turkish performative traditions do not, and probably would not use the term face-to-face for describing their mode of transmission. In the tradition of *âşıklık*, the interaction that is particular to the transmission of this art is considered as happening *sine-to-sine*.⁴ Although *sine* basically corresponds to the breast in English, it also implies the inside of the breast, therefore the heart, both physically and metaphorically (*Büyük Türkçe Sözlük*, 2019b). An alternative to the term *sine-to-sine* is *gönül-to-gönül*. *Gönül* is an idiosyncratic Turkish word, which is extensively used in *tasavvuf* (Gölpınarlı, 2006; Kurnaz, 1996). Although the primary meaning of *gönül* is again, the heart, it also denotes the source of the feelings in the heart. Besides, in *tasavvuf*, it corresponds to the power in the depths of

⁴ In her article on Iranian Azerbaijani *âşıklık* tradition, Charlotte F. Albright quotes the words of an *âşık* while describing how the transmission of a piece occurred: “He said that the poem had been handed down *sinah be sinah* (chest to chest, that is, orally) for years” (1976: 239). Azerbaijani *âşiks* perform in Azeri Turkish, which is very similar to Turkish that is spoken in Turkey.

the soul that would allow a person to connect with the world, other human beings, and God (*Büyük Türkçe Sözlük*, 2019a), as well as the location of love (Kurnaz, 1996). As mentioned earlier, love and having one's heart full of love has primary significance in *tasavvuf*. As a part of their self-cultivation process, the followers of *tasavvuf* are supposed to interact with everybody and everything around them with love and respect, that is, from their *gönül*. In this sense, acting from *gönül* and interacting with others *gönül-to-gönül* is a significant part of the *âdâb* of *tasavvuf* (Gölpınarlı, 2006).

This affective aspect in the *âdâb* of *tasavvuf* is substantially embraced by Turkish performative traditions. A perfect piece of evidence is that *âşık* means “lover” and being “in love” in Turkish (*Sesli Sözlük*, 2019a). It is a term borrowed in the 16th century by Turkish storytelling tradition from *tasavvuf* (Heziyeva, 2010). Echoing the idiom “There can be no *meşk* without love”, an *âşık* is assumed to sing and/or play from his/her *gönül*, that is, their heart full of love. This is also true for a master of *musiki* or the tradition of *saz*. The lyrics of the song called *Gönül Dağı* (The Mountain of *Gönül*; 1992), which is written and composed by a well-known 20th century master of the tradition of *saz* called Neşet Ertaş (1938-2012) tells us the secret that “*Kalpten kalbe giden bir yol vardır, görülmez / Gönülden gönüle gider yol gizli gizli* (There is a way from heart to heart, which is not seen / It goes from *gönül* to *gönül*)” (*TRT Nota Arşivi*, 2011). In this sense, it would not be wrong to say that according to the unwritten rules of its *âdâb*, participating with one's *gönül* is an indispensable precondition for *meşk*. To be a part of this specific performance, one has to not only know, but also embody this basic principle. This knowledge involves the embodiment of a traditional attitude as well.

The Quest for the ‘Ancient Attitude’

Attitude —*tavır* in Turkish (*Sesli Sözlük*, 2019h)— is another significant term that is particular to Turkish performative traditions, especially in the genres of music. Although it also denotes the performance style that is particular to a region or a context, *tavır* basically means the performance style of a master (Behar, 2014; Öztürk, 2002). In this manner, having an attitude is very much related to what Bryant (2005) calls empersonment. The masters of Turkish music are considered as having an attitude when they make the tradition their own. However, performing with an attitude should not mean being discordant with the tradition. In fact, each genre has its own

specific attitude to which all practitioners must conform, even if they perform with a personal attitude. Using *meşk* as a teaching method is quite significant for the transmission of this genre-specific attitude.

Ayas (2015) suggests that one of the important advantages of the system of *meşk* is providing the transmission of *tavr-ı kadim* —a concept that can be translated into English as “ancient attitude” (*Sesli Sözlük*, 2019b):

Kadim is a tradition that is transmitted to today from master to pupil in a chain; its starting point, which was in the distant past, cannot be hunted out. [...] here “*kadim*” is different from “old” in ordinary language and essentially means “the new that does not get old”. The key concept of traditionalism is the “precedent”. A new thing can only be made according to the precedent. This is the most important tension area between the traditionalist mentality that looks for a precedent in the past for any kind of innovation, and the modern mentality that goes in search of the new without any precedent (Ayas, 2015: 86).

This specific aspect of creating while repeating the precedent in Turkish traditional performing arts becomes most visible while a performer improvises in a *meşk*. As American ethnomusicologist Karl Signell points out, improvisation is an important aesthetic element in Turkish music:

[E]very instrumentalist is judged by his ability to improvise. Alone and exposed during the solo *taksim* (improvisation), he must create an impromptu composition showing his own originality and flair for invention as well as correctly following the commonly understood guidelines for the stated *makam* (mode) (1974: 45).

Here the interesting point is that the performers are appreciated most when they find a balance between repetition and innovation. As Signell explains,

[e]ach makam has associated with it a stock of commonly recognized characteristic motives and phrases. If the artist belabors the clichés in his *taksim*, he will be yawned at but accepted. If he can produce an original motive or phrase of some succinctness and beauty, he will be applauded and shown respect by his peers. The greatest compliment is given [...] when a musician borrows another’s phrase for his own *taksim* (1974: 47).

In other words, the musicians are most respected when they create something new according to a precedent. In fact, this is what is at the core of the traditional aesthetics in Turkish performing arts. What comes out in and through *meşk* is not simply a repetition of the old, but the creation of something that is new and old at the same time. This renders the centuries-old practice of *meşk* as an unending search for the new that does not get old. As Bryant sums up, in this context

[t]radition, then, can be understood as a sensibility acquired through repetition, as one shapes oneself to become the type of person capable not only of further repetition but also, more importantly, of innovation (2005: 231).

Conclusion: Tradition Here-and-Now

Throughout this article, I aimed to display distinctive qualities of *meşk*, which is not only a mode of transmission, but also an idiosyncratic performance style that is particular to traditional performing arts of Turkey. I argued that Turkish performative traditions are shaped by these qualities to a great extent.

What characterizes *meşk* is the live, direct, largely embodied and highly affective interaction between its actors. The implicit purpose of such an interaction is disciplining the soul by disciplining the body so that the participants of *meşk* can discover their self not only as an artist, but also as a human being, as it is aimed in Turkish esoteric teaching of *tasavvuf*. This discovery, which is, in fact, a process of empersonment, is ensured by the transmission of *âdâb* (cultivated behaviour) through constant practice in *meşk*, as well as the employment of structural system called *makam*, which demands that the performers of *meşk* innovate while at the same time repeating what already exists as 'traditional'. In this sense, performing *meşk* might be considered as a ceaseless quest for the new that does not get old. According to the traditional perspective, the essential prerequisite for this quest to succeed is maintaining heart-to-heart transmission of unwritten, unspoken secrets in the arts in question, which can only be embodied and taught by a qualified master. This is how Turkish performative traditions have survived for centuries until today. Such a mode of transmission is certainly fragile, as it depends on living people, who must inevitably act here-and-now. Nevertheless, as there is no other way of transmitting the secrets in

question, it is very precious as well. *Meşk* is a phenomenon that cannot be spoken, written down and/or kept frozen in an archive. It would either happen here-and-now through heart-to-heart interaction between living people, or cease to exist.

This study attracts attention to all these idiosyncratic qualities of *meşk* with an aim of demonstrating its significance as an effective and powerful mode of transmission. As it is seen throughout the article, maintaining the vitality of *meşk* is crucial for the future of Turkish performative traditions. On the other hand, understanding its subtle qualities and displaying how it works would pave the way for its employment by non-traditional arts as well, as it can act as a model for embodied transmission. In this sense, the discussion in this article aims to contribute not only to researches on performative traditions, but also to innovative approaches in the transmission of contemporary performing arts.

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