

# Classical Turkish music in semai coffeehouses in Istanbul of Ottoman period<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract** – In Ottoman Period, the coffeehouses which were important centers in terms of socialization were important places for being places where the spiritual needs like chatting, exchanges of views, discussion were met and they were also important places for entertainment. Although the coffeehouses continued their function in almost every city in Ottoman geography, they were more active in Istanbul, the capital of Ottoman. These places which took part in the social life since the 16th century, continued their function in the general sense even though they encountered with the case of being banished. These special places which were also named as Semai Coffeehouses were important places where the performances about music were realised as they were units where the artistic activities were revealed especially in Tanzimat reform era and after then. In our research, by embracing particular characteristics of Semai Coffeehouses, a set of results will be obtained by examining the effects of Turkish music which are performed in these places in the context of socialization and in what position this music is held in the places which are mentioned.

**Keywords** – Semai coffeehouses, Classical Turkish Music, İstanbul of Ottoman Period.

## 1. Introduction

Coffee refers to both the beverage which is prepared by mixing ground coffee beans and hot water together and the place where people have coffee or other drinks (Bostan, 2001). Coffee (as a beverage) was brought from Ethiopia where it had been consumed as dough to Yemen and cultivated in that region later on. In this regard the arabic word “kahva” (which might be pronounced like coffa in English) is thought to have derived from “Kafa”, name of a coffee production center in Ethiopia at that time (Emeksiz, 2009).

Having given an over all explanation of the origin of the word “coffee”, an important part of the concept of “Semai Coffee House” that is also our main subject, we think it will be useful to lay stress on the word “Semai”. In Turkish classical music it refers to a triple time or three-beat “usul” (a system of rhythmic mode in Turkish classical music) or known as a form of piece created with this mode. Also in the context of relationship between music and literature, it refers to the folk poetry or folk composition consisted of stanzas with 4+4 syllabic meter. Semai coffeehouse which was described as a coffeehouses where bards, aşık came together where duets were made between the poets and where semai and poems were read was sybolized as a completion (Ayverdi, 2005). Apart from the mentioned coffeehouses, coffeehouses which appealed to the various classes of people took part in the geography of Turkey. These coffeehouses were generally named as Yeniceri coffeehouses, fire brigade coffeehouses, aşık coffeehouses, and public storyteller coffeehouses. In the coffeehouses tobacco products were more consumed than coffee but coffeehouses were used as names for these places because there was a fetwa saying that coffee was not forbidden by religion (Sakaoğlu & Akbayar, 2000).

Apart from this coffeehouses where were among places of joy like pubs, were the symbol of decent places as no alcohol was consumed and were places of cultural mixture for all kinds of people (Bingül, 2013). While coffee culture had an important place in the oriental society, it was almost unknown to western society (Faroqhi, 2002). Yet the coffeehouses in Ottoman Empire especially in the 19th century confront us as an important part of life. American writer Francis Marion-Crawford who came to Istanbul during his travel in Europe, clearly showed the importance of coffee in the Ottoman society with his article travel impressions which was later translated in Turkish with the title Istanbul. “Turkish people during working hours used to eat, drink their coffees and smoke in open air when they had free time” (Ünsal, 2011).

As we can infer from the example, coffee was a very important beverage among Turkish people. Such that, the name “Turkish Coffee” was accepted in many of the geographies and seen as a unique taste. Even it didn’t belong to the Turkish nation originally, the coffee which was introduced to the World created an identity with the boiling style peculiar to this nation (Bingül, 2013).

## 2. Coffee and coffee houses in Ottoman Istanbul

Istanbul, which followed a specific population policy after being conquered by the Turks, became a place which was liked by both muslims and non-moslem (Ortaylı, 2006). In this context, the city which turned into a center where lots of people from various places and nationalities socialized, gave an opportunity to scientific, commercial, social, cultural and artistic relations take place in its organization. Some places were needed in order these activities to take place. Like mutual share places such as pubs, boza houses, tea houses etc, coffee houses were among these important centers. Coffee houses were much more important places in Ottoman society than pubs, boza houses and tea houses as it was prohibited to use alcohol and tobacco products in coffee houses.

<sup>1</sup> This paper was presented orally in “III. European Conference on Social and Behavioal Sciences” (6-8 February, 2014) held in Sapienza University, Faculty of Sociology, Rome, Italy

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In this sense, coffee houses in Ottoman's Classical period were thought as extent of religious life and as a result of this, these places were built by mosques. The people who were waiting for the time of salaah (namaz) used to sit in the coffee houses and during this time used to listen to the epics which strengthened the sense of belief or heroic epos like *Danişmendnâme*, *Battalnâme* (Işın, 1985). Distinct from Classical period, coffee houses in almost all periods, had a special importance in the month of ramadan, and these places which took place in the crowded streets like Aksaray, Divanyolu, Top-hane, Şehzadebaşı, Direklerarası and Cemse Square in Galata, were highly preferred in the nights of ramadan (Balıkhane Minister Ali Rıza Bey, year not known).

The first coffee houses in Ottoman Empire were opened in Tahtakale district in Istanbul between the years 1554-1555. The reason for choosing Tahtakale was because of the fact that the district had both a cosmopolitan configuration, and top government officials didn't determine the effects and interactions directly although they kept a close watch on these places (Bingül, 2013).

Tahtakale district became a network where goods, people, languages and cultures coming from Ottoman lands and Europe came together and similarly where many products were sent out (Eldem, 1997). In this parallel, as a result of the fact that people needed some places where they socialized, chatted, had rest and even had fun while they were shopping, coffee houses became the most popular places of the district thanks to some of their specialities.

Coffee houses which increased in number in many of the districts of Istanbul, were places which people stopped by especially in the periods of III. Murad, III. Mehmet, I. Ahmet, I. Mustafa and II. Osman. In the coffee houses apart from dialogues, people used to listen to the public storytellers while they were smoking water pipe or sticks containing opium and watch the dancers and were fascinated by the pleasure and world of dreams. The sultan of the period IV. Murad who witnessed this situation closed these places down and put an end to this primrose path. These places which entered into service again after the death of the sultan, were closed down again as they were places where Yeniceri organization's extent and fans came together (II. Mahmud put an end to this Yeniceri army after bloody city battles).

The coffee houses which were important places for socializing, had also an important role as they were entertainment centers in Ottoman society. These places caused a set of changes in social relations. One of the most important changes was that different people from different nations came together and alienation and differentiation disappeared (<http://www.avvakti.net>, Date of Access: 18.01.2013).

Coffee houses in Ottoman society was seen as places where culture was shared and private life was spent apart from home-sanctuary-bazaar triplet. In parallel with these, coffee houses were spread almost everywhere in Istanbul, "Mahalle kahvesi" (a kind of coffee house) phenomenon became widespread rapidly. Rather than being a socializing place, "Mahalle kahvesi" became a center where people came together and talked about the problems of the district and the needs determined (Sökmen, 2011). Such that coffee houses performances which discussed the current problems in Istanbul became one with the real life, as a result of this theatre's link function between streets and stage wasn't needed any more (Kömeçoğlu, 2010).

Mahalle kahvesi wasn't seen adequate as the time went by and various kinds of profession and art category coffee houses showed up. Moreover some coffee houses left their places to different category coffee houses in time. For example Yeniceri coffee houses left their places to Tulumbacı (fire brigade) coffee houses, and Aşık to Semai coffee houses (Sökmen, 2011). Likewise, it is known that many of the coffee houses in Republic period were inherited from Ottoman period. Especially some places in the districts such as Beyazıt, Babıali, Şehzadebaşı and Beyoğlu are examples of these places. The places such as Sarafim in Beyazıt, İkbâl and Meserret in Babıali, Fevziye and Darü'ttâlim in Şehzadebaşı, Eftalikus in Beyoğlu are among the important names of these inherited places.

## 2.1. Cultural and artistic activities which generally take place in Coffee Houses

Apart from consuming coffee and tea in the coffee houses, it is known that conversation almost in every subject continue while consuming tobacco, narghile and other delighting stuff. And it is a reality that apart from all these activities, some live performances were exhibited. Notably eulogy show in ottoman culture and entertainment life (meddahlık), shadow play, call-and-response, poem concert, music and dance shows were most known of all.

Before Ottoman Empire's establishment, verbal story tradition which was one of the art branches that was brought to the Anatolia by the Turkish people, confront us as a style which was kept alive by the turkish popular poet-singer who had unique manner apart from poets who wrote farsi poets in the Seljukian palaces (Nutku, 1995). Eulogy show in ottoman culture and entertainment life (meddahlık) (Ayverdi, 2005) is histrionics which means telling stories in public access places by using different people, dialect and by imitating animals and which make people laugh and think and it attracted great attention especially in 16th and 17th century (Sevengil, 1985). While these artists were telling their stories with their colorful handkerchiefs and rods which were the indicator of their profession, sometimes took musicians' support to accompany them (Lewis, 1973). Meddah (public storyteller) is very important in Ottoman coffee houses culture so it gave a chance to Meddah Coffeehouses which were privatized with their names to be opened. Such that, not only public storytellers performed their shows there but also "Karagöz" (shadow play) was performed which made people laugh and think like eulogy show in ottoman culture and entertainment life (Emeksiz, 2009). Dancers who were important in the art of dance of Ottoman Empire performed their shows accompanied by music. The coffee houses in Galata and Top-hane which were mostly liked by foreigners were important places used by these dancers (Birsal, 2009).

Apart from all these coffee houses activities, it is recorded that people used to play chess and checkers. These places which were named as "Kibar kahvehâneleri" (coffeehouses for kind people) were places mostly preferred by those who were from upper class and the wise (Balıkhane Nazırı Ali Rıza Bey, year not known).

### 3. Semai coffeehouses

Semai coffeehouses are one of the rich culture and art centers of Ottoman Istanbul. These places which were also known as coffeehouses with music after the rescript of Gülhane were first known as Aşık coffeehouses. From the 16th century, bards who read epos and ballad in mahalle coffeehouses, constituted different places for themselves and as the time went by Semai coffeehouses came into existence. In Ottoman period mahalle coffeehouses were interested in administrative aspect but aşık coffeehouses were interested in cultural aspect. There are many Semai coffeehouses in Tavukpazarı district in Istanbul and cultural relations with nearby cities were made throughout this center. Rural regions of Anatolia were represented thanks to these Semai coffeehouses. There was a different settlement design in Semai coffeehouses. Such that there wasn't a traditional seating order; there was a theatre-style seating order (<http://www.ayvakti.net>, Date of Access: 18.01.2013).

Semai coffeehouses after the rescript of Gülhane especially in the periods of Sultan Abdülaziz and II. Abdülhamid continued their existence in a different manner by taking the place of aşık coffeehouses. In aşık coffeehouses, only stringed instrument was played as instrument but in Semai coffeehouses, besides stringed instrument, harmonica, clarinet, drum, çiftenara (a kind of instrument), zilli maşa (a kind of instrument) was also played, western style music was also performed and the people who performed music in these places by using stringed instrument were named meydan şairi (square poet). Paralelly semai coffeehouses were also important because of the fact that programmed entertainment sense was first used (Sökmen, 2011).

The best time of semai coffeehouses were in the period of II. Abdülhamid (1876-1909). Such that in the period of this sultan, bards Corporation was established in Istanbul (Birsell, 2009). One of the points which caught attention in this period was that semai coffeehouses were opened in many of the districts apart from Tavukpazarı district. Semai coffeehouses were opened in especially ramadan month in Beyazıt Merdivenli, old Saraçhanebaşı Yüksek Kahve, Unkapanı, Çeşme Square, Firuzağa, Kasımpaşa, Üsküdar, Yeni Mahalle and Selamsız. Semai coffeehouses had mutrib (voice and instrument performers) and competitions for reading semai were organized. In this context, when the important coffeehouses in Istanbul with music such as Muhittin Kahya's in Kadıköy, Vasif Hoca's in Üsküdar and in Anadolu Hisarı (owner not known) were taken into consideration, semai coffeehouses in almost every district of Istanbul became culture and art center and they also had the characteristic of educating in terms of music.

This function of semai coffeehouses showed both high level of old Istanbul in terms of art and culture and the love of the Ottoman society towards fine arts (Ataman, 2006). Musical activities gathered speed in time and the first examples of "piyasa sâzendeliği" (public instrument player) which began to become popular in the 19th century were seen here (Özalp, 2000).

Semai coffeehouses were most liked in ramadan month. Especially after teravih salaah these places were liked by people and people also preferred these places in order to have fun. Generally craftsmen used to prefer to go these places but top government officials used to enjoy there as well (Birsell, 2009). At first folk music was highly preferred in these coffeehouses as reflection of aşıklık tradition but in time Classical Turkish Music was also liked. The instruments such as Tanbur, şezdar, santur, different kinds of harp, reed flüte, violin, daire and miskal were among the instruments played in these places (Aksoy, 2003).

Another point which draws attention is that those who came to these places were important musicians of the time. These people both made their personal meetings and performed their art there. In addition to this they also gave music courses. For example in one of the coffeehouses in Eyüp, the two important artists Eyyubi Mehmed Efendi and İsmail Dede used to sit there and practise for hours. Zekai Dede who would become a great name in the future took courses from these people in these places. This educating event continued until Ahmed Rasim who would later become a famous writer and composer (Birsell, 2009). At the same time there were famous musicians who came to listen to the performances of these artists. Thanks to this, performances were evaluated by the critics. The performances which were directed by Vâsilâki (the famous name of the period) were listened by the famous names such as Tanburi Cemil Bey, Rauf Yekta, Lemi Atlı of the period. (Birsell, 2009).

In addition to all these activities, Darüttalim-i Mûsiki Cemiyeti which was among the important music institutions of the period and which was established by the composer Fahri Kopuz in 1916 was known to perform music in Şezadebaşı and Beyazıt pubs. Darüttalim pub which took its name from this institution hosted this community (Evren, 1996:213). Based on this we can say that some coffeehouses were formed whose main purpose was to perform music.

These artistic characteristics of Semai coffeehouses showed the high level of Ottoman society about art and culture and showed the love of the society towards fine arts. Semai coffeehouses which were also known as coffeehouses with music, began to lose its importance after constitutional monarchy II and during the first World war which broke out in 1914 lost its previous dynamism totally (Ataman, 2006).

### 4. Conclusions and Discussion

Coffee became autonomous as a drink belonging to the Orient community at the point of origin and usage preferences. In particular, it spread in other provinces of the Ottoman lands, especially in Istanbul, and became a part of this culture. An important factor in the preference of coffee may be the ban of alcoholic drinks in the Islamic faith. Thus, for the occurrence of coffee consumption, the allocation of special places called "kahvehane" and owing to this, the formation of cultural, commercial and artistic communication were natural. The consumption of many tobacco products other than coffee in the coffee shop was not welcomed in some periods and thus some prohibitions were introduced by the government. Despite this, the fact that these places went into operation again several times means that they met the needs of people. These places that were called according to their functions were not only places in which there were many artistic performances, but they also became the centre of political, economic, social and cultural exchange by their regulars. The reason of this is that people are social beings and they always need each other. "Semâi kahvehâneleri" that were the main places of our topic were the centre where the art of music was pursued. "Semâi kahvehâneleri" that were an extension of "aşık kahvehâneleri" where

the tradition of folk music was kept alive changed their music preferences over time. These places which became home to classical Turkish music caused this music genre to become popular by using its forms and instruments. The important people of Classical Turkish Music participated in these “kahvehaneler”(coffee houses) as performers and as listeners and sometimes as educators. As we have pointed out in our research, the spread of “ Semâî kahvehâneleri” becomes in in the Ottoman Tanzimat Period, which has been a sensitive period. The ideology of westernization which clearly reveals itself in the period of Ottoman Sultan Mahmud II. has become an official politics since Tanzimat Period. The westernization breakthroughs made by the government during this period of time of two sultans are not only in the military, economic and social fields but also in social and artistic platforms. A variety of arts of the West and many forms belonging to these arts were seriously in demand during Tanzimat Period and work to be done in this regard is highly supported by the state. Western music which constituted an exact place for itself in Ottoman palace during Sultan II. Mahmud period strengthened its place in [the political reforms made in the ottoman state in 1839](#)(Tanzimat). In the beginning of the 19th century, the institutions which guarded Classical Turkish Music in the body of the palace, were subjected to some functional changes in parallel with name changes. Musicians who gradually lost their previous respected periods in the palace, began to isolate themselves from this environment partially and began to need to find some other places to perform their art. As a result of this they joined to the official or private music institutions and joined to the atmosphere of the coffeehouses which was more convenient for socialising. In this regard Semai coffeehouses were different from others in any sense and these places played the role of stage or a concert hall. The performances which were realised in these places, underlied the casino music which would later be in fashion in Istanbul. In our day, there is no representative of Semai coffeehouses which disappeared in the beginning of the 20th century. Casinos which can be accepted as the extent of Semai coffeehouses almost disappeared in our day and left their places to some other places which have a much more different entertainment and art concept.

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