

## Review

# Istanbul as the mosaic of cultures, dance and westernisation

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Accepted 24 November, 2011

Through the ongoing process of growth, ability inherent in the mankind, the human being has demonstrated the will to multiply and be integrated with the tendency to overcome oneself throughout the course of life. Instead of the attempts for fictional models, this process has directly made the ways for emulation of the Western model more attractive, but the possibility of tension that might arise between the existing cultural values and the Western values has been overseen. The changes that have been imposed regardless of spontaneity have also brought together several contrasts. Having witnessed the transformation in dance thanks to its cultural diversity gained through its geographical priority, Istanbul has encouraged the attempts for Westernization throughout the historical process, both embracing the minority groups, and presenting them the opportunities to conserve and spread their traditions. These possibilities witnessed a transformation through their efficient involvement with the social and cultural life. Constructed in a way that could highlight its potential mission to mobilize transformation and enables to break up a probable resistance in the society, this study focuses on the changes that took place before and after the declaration of Republic during the westernization process.

**Keywords:** Dance, westernization, culture, transformation, İstanbul.

## INTRODUCTION

Besides economic, administrative, juridical, and scientific contributions to the shaping of societies, artistic contributions cultivate an influence on the creation of authenticity within societies. This impact, which eliminates the possibility for societies to have the same characteristics from all aspects, enables civilizations to be constructed with a unique capacity pregnant for original formations. Any effort for assimilation, displaying an inclination through the attraction generated by the use of power, cannot surpass being an imitation, which also involves ignoring the originalities of societies.

Through the ongoing process of growth, an ability inherent in the mankind, the human being has demonstrated the will to multiply and be integrated with the tendency to overcome oneself throughout the course of life. This tendency has necessitated the ways for a new ideal search by means of renewal, change and transformation, away from the static assimilation model.

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values and the Western values has been overseen. The changes that have been imposed regardless of spontaneity have also brought together several contrasts.

The meaning of Westernization refers to an extraordinary acceleration in the pace of change and a sharper transformation for the underdeveloped or developing countries, defeated by the temptation of development. This change, which seizes the opportunity to find a more extensive ground thanks to social mobility, could lead to polarizations in some cases.

Even though the West-East polarization, having emerged through the modernization process, is generally believed to be based on religious grounds, such a perception loses its validity under a condition in which social groups sharing the same religion are confronted with modernization, because in both cases social response is formed with an objection to change, gaining its impetus from the society itself, and then it becomes purely evident that the problem is not necessarily caused by religious issues.

Located between the two continents, Istanbul, being a witness to the unmatched meeting and synthesis of

different religions and cultures together with its origins from the Middle East, never lost its dynamic character in almost all throughout the history, maintaining its opportunity for regeneration all the time and transforming different cultures into an attractive meeting point with its privilege as the melting pot of different colors and cultures.

Having witnessed a transformation in the art of dance thanks to its cultural diversity that has been gained through the geographical priority held by the city, Istanbul has also encouraged the attempts for Westernization throughout the historical process. Meanwhile, the city has not only embraced the minority groups, but also presented them the opportunities to conserve and spread their traditions and customs. Compared to those extended to the local peoples, the opportunities, and tolerance provided to these groups reveal a striking difference in between.

Such a generosity, which may have been unprecedented almost in any world culture, could be explained only through the hospitality of Turkish society. Thus, the approach of giving the utmost priority to the guest has enabled more tolerance towards the person in question, and also paved the way for an easier way to adopt his/her cultural riches.

Istanbulites, who loved to make visits and have guests in their own houses, used to organize some artistic activities in their meetings, and they even invited poets to these occasions. Moreover, there was an increase in the number of such presentations in line with the economic standards of a host, and those who were from the higher classes and could afford the required opportunities provided their guests with more colorful settings adorned with music and dance performances. According to Evliya Çelebi's account, there were more than 6000 musicians excluding the official ones in the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and those musicians attending such invitations were accompanied by dancers most of whom were Circassian or Romani (Manstran, 1991).

Even Ibn Haldun, a remarkable politician and sociologist of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, highlights in his work titled "Mukkaddime" that wedding ceremonies and feasts, accompanied by songs, dances and musical instruments and particularly organized in palaces and cities, are among the necessities of social life, and he states that a class of teachers who taught dancing, singing and playing an instrument was born as an essential part of the city life within the framework of these artistic activities (Uslu, 2010).

Thanks to this new class of people who provided an opportunity for changes in the understanding of entertainment and the tradition of its practice, the artistic tendencies for integration with social life became more prevalent and the individual seized the opportunity to express himself/herself by this way. The feeling of tolerance caused by the seized privilege and the new point of view created by artistic education contributed to

the increase in the number of musicians and dancers in the following years.

Later under Suleyman the Magnificent's ruling period and in his successors's periods until the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, Istanbul seemed to be a highly modern society. Istanbul and Istanbulites lived in a time of full prosperity throughout the golden age of the Ottoman Empire, which was experienced in every part of life from the political, economic, social, intellectual, and spiritual aspects (Mantran, 1991).

The British, Russian, and French imperial powers, which gained impetus all around the world during the 1880s and 90s, encouraged Muslim minorities who avoided living under non-Muslim ruling systems to take refuge under the Ottoman Empire. Moreover, after 1857 the Ottoman government launched some initiatives that could be motivating for immigration, even putting up notices about this issue into the European newspapers. The government, which also welcomed non-Muslim population during those years, excluded the immigrant Muslims from tax and military service; however, it did not avoid stipulating certain conditions in the acceptance of immigrants (Deringil, 1991).

The multi-colored atmosphere in the social structure was, in this sense, based on the above-mentioned efforts. Within these practices maintained under the Muslim roof there was no obligation to leave certain acts of freedom, and in some cases it was observed that minorities acquired more privileges than the settled population.

Through his observations about Istanbul, which he visited in 1874, Edmondo De Amicis in his book titled *Istanbul*, sounds as if he wants to describe the tolerant character in the city by saying, "The Europeans live here as if they were in the union of republics; the individual here has the pleasure of freedom to take at a moment of pure chaos in any European city: this is an everlasting festival, a carnival", and also by defining Istanbul as "a nymph with a thousand lovers" (Amicis, 2006, p. 135).

As the heart of cultural fusions through its cosmopolitan structure, lively atmosphere of entertainment, architectural riches, artistic activities, Istanbul has been a world city with its potential to meet both the minority groups' and the local people's expectations by means of its position open to the new changes and its conditions that could relieve the longing for adaptation to the West. All these characteristics have rendered the city of Istanbul into a livable place, and the making of art into a viable practice.

Owing to its potential task in the context of raising convergence between societies, the art of dance, through its socializing aspect, turned into a necessity within the period of Westernization. Thus, the convenience for others to adopt the diversities of dance, which is a manly motive, holds a privileged position in terms of its break with a potential state of resistance against change.

When the attempts to relieve this necessity, which was

caused by momentary transformations imposed in the social and cultural life, were again grounded on the solutions of Western origin, the problem revealed a tendency to get worse. While this process, which could be defined as regeneration pains, could, in fact, have been overcome with minimal harm by means of calculated policies; it was capable of leading to big damages, sometimes to the extent of socio-cultural collapses.

Westernization essentially has two different faces: on the one hand, it has been interpreted as the reason for social disintegration due to the class discrimination it has created in the society; on the other hand, it has been described as the trigger for the revolutions that have taken place on the way to modernization.

From past to the present Westernization, which could be defined as an approach grounded on the basis of adopting different searches, has been existent as a phenomenon that has grown out of the human being's inner motive for renovation. Atatürk's following remarks highlight a historical fact of the Turkish Nation, "The movement that have been pursued by Turks for years has conserved a persistent direction. We have always walked from the East to the West" (Republic of Turkey - Ministry of National Education, n.d.).

The courage and leadership displayed by the West during the processes of modernization and renovation gave birth to the notion of "westernization", which has nearly been attributed to the meaning of modernization. In the overcoming of this process, the necessity to make the art widespread over the ground level and its feedback expected from this ground could provide remarkable contributions.

The artist is always inclined to move towards a step further. The artist is innovative. That is also the reason which makes the art and artist responsible for the westernization period. From this perspective, the art of dance, designed with movements of the body, although believed to be the source of all evil actions in the middle ages, stood out with its functionality in the modernization process. The change in the way of perceptions into the body from the middle ages to the modern times was caused by a transformation of the west into an attraction center, which took place as the reflections of the renaissance and reform movements. The extraordinary change in this understanding also played an efficient role in the bodily necessity for a social renewal process.

Dances, which reflect the inner lives of societies on the artistic dimension, display parallel aspects to the cultural makeup in the context of customs and traditions. The original structure of traditional dances is constructed by artistic and intellectual expressions shaped by the living and working styles and forms under the impact of beliefs.

These expressions making up the assimilation process, despite the contrasts, have enabled communities to lead very close lives together and show tolerance for their cultural richness among each other.

During the Ottoman palace festivities in the Pre-Republican Era, dance started its journey as an event to watch, in which only *çengis* or *köçeks* took part and the concubines accompanied with their music. In the late periods of the Ottoman Empire, the teachings of dance and music practiced outside the palace were protested, and it was claimed that the woman and the man were committing a sin by together performing music and dance in these institutions. Dance, after becoming more prevalent with the declaration of Turkish Republic, ceased to be an event to watch and turned into a form which was welcomed particularly by the notables, who considered it as an essential part of the modern lifestyle. In this sense, including a picture of sharing that was practiced by the woman and man in the same place and at the same time for a society which had mostly been molded with the contrasting view of the woman separated from the man up to that time, dance was characterized by an extraordinary revolution moving from a virtual form to a real one through its new identity of Western origin.

However, *kanto* dancers on the comedy stages isolated from drama, performing through the improvisational theatres in the Second Constitutional Monarchy Period, had to be chosen from the minorities such as Armenians, Greeks, or Jews since it was impossible for a Turkish woman to show herself on the stage (Saraçoğlu, 2005).

Being one of the popular dance forms inspired by the West, *kanto*, was performed for fancy songs that were accompanied by dances besides the play in order to create diversity in the improvisational theatres of the 19th century Istanbul, and to keep the public attention alive for a few hours. The forms of presenting *kanto* dances, instead of their artistic values, played a role in *kanto* raising widespread interest in the improvisational theatres. It became influential in a period when measures of value in the society began to change with an aspiration for modernization" (Özer, 2005, p. 403-404).

Issuing the laws and rules concerning the recreation life in the early 1930s, the governments at the time laid the foundations that could bring the society to modern way of life and entertainment. It was observed that dance was specially included in the advertisements of hotels, restaurants, and cocktails in 1948. Also, dance contests were held during the afternoon performances in "Çayhane Dancing", which was placed in Beyoğlu Passage and especially popular among the young. During the same years dance nights were held especially on Saturday nights on a city-line ferry, where even dance contests were organized; however, different meanings were later attributed to these ferry nights, which ended up in their closure (Zat, 2002).

The White Russians, who took refuge in Turkey in the years between 1918-1921, amounting up to 180,000, brought about radical changes in the recreation life of Istanbul. There were also Russian ballet dancers among these immigrants. The artists used to dance in Gardenbar for more than one hour every night, performing as they

did through Russian ballets in Europe, and received unexpected interest of the public (Adil, 1990).

Even in the earlier period after the Declaration of Constitutional Monarchy in 1908, it was observed that couples of men and women skating in harmony with the rhythm of the orchestra performed dance tricks in the "Skating Palace", where performers wore roller skates. The men were accompanied by the women of minority origin during these performances, as it was impossible for Muslim women to take part in such an entertainment event at the time (Saraçoğlu, 2005).

In the following years roller skates were replaced by ice skates, and the rectangular pool in the front garden of İstanbul Hilton Terrace Restaurant was used as a rink in the winter, with its water frozen. Lasting only for a few years, this activity, however, had to be excluded from the list of recreational events (Zat, 2002).

Such changes that were introduced to the social life on the basis of imitation paved the way for the conservation of those assimilated and the polarization of those excluded. "Even though the mutation that is experienced through change is first faced with resistance in the social life, this process, as if it were out of spontaneity, could be melted in the natural life setting, and every required condition for the elimination of originality through the mask of modernization could be provided one by one in an elaborate manner with a view to breaking up the resistance" (Akgül, 2007).

The fascinating charm of the West has asserted its presence with its attempt to narrow the view of societies as much as possible, the bonds of which have been weakened through the traditional structure. The environment that is created stands out with its convenience to be controllable. However, a state of awareness about the calculated scenarios could give rise to conscious steps.

*Tango*, which was a *sine qua non* of the Republic Balls, became more popular after gaining a more special meaning through the performances of, the founder of Turkish Republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, to such an extent that La Cumparsita, even amazing the Argentineans, turned into a tradition as the opening dance in Turkish wedding ceremonies. With the aim of regeneration and adaptation to the West, while dance forms such as *tango*, *foxtrot*, *charleston*, *twist* etc., accompanying the Turkish society within an ongoing search during the modernization process, were formerly used only as a means, they were changed into an aim in itself through the process of harmonization in the Republic, and thus, the Western culture was increasingly adopted from day to day by the people gathering to dance at special nights.

The western identity attributed to tango in the process of harmonization stood in sharp contrast to the eastern identity. The way of performance, contrasting with Anatolian dances which rarely include performances by couples of women and men because of the social codes

associated with gender relations, constitutes the basis of the harsh intolerance against tango. The difference in question is related to a highly narrowed personal circle restricted with bodies facing one another and arms held together instead of a society that is used to dancing side by side, shoulder to shoulder or hand in hand. In essence, considering the obvious difference in the ways by which the two dances are performed, the reason for the social reaction asserts itself quite clearly. However, under the conditions at the time westernization was described, so to speak, as a guarantee of the Republic the youth, and it was intended to be raised with western culture because of their innovative approach.

Though bringing up the new generations through the Western culture to provide them with an easier way of adaptation to the modern life was considered a remarkable opportunity during this process, there was an overlooked point, as well: the tendencies growing among the young to despise their alienated culture! The possibility to reach a resolution on this problem over time was lowered and removed by the dominant and incentive policies of the West. The attempts to isolate the folk dances, reflecting a characterization of the rural culture, from the life of a young individual carefully brought up in the process of culturisation that was shaped by the Western influence, must have left such deep impacts that today's young people, interestingly, show striking rates of attendance to the popular dances, compared to their performances in the local ones.

However, what is intended to achieve here is to curtain the fact that some popular dances are also the local forms of some peoples. The privileged potential power inherent in Turkish Folk Dances could be discovered only through a decrease in the frequency of tendencies displayed by the Turkish Youth viewing the Western dances more preferable than their own forms. Accordingly, rather than following the West through closed eyes without any certain identity, the aim here must be to raise an awareness of one's own cultural values and to bring up generations that are both informed about their own social structure of values, and coordinated with the West in the light of this acquired awareness.

Mustafa Kemal highlighted that Western dances were, in fact, the local dances of societies. In this sense, while acknowledging the challenge with the efforts to establish such a culture in a social order excluding coupled dances, he also underlined that the new understanding in local dance performances would be remarkable for coupled public performances of the two gender identities, forbidden to be together on the stage, in terms of sharing nationally cultural riches with other world cultures as well as breaking up the social resistance held against the westernization process.

Within this framework, believing that the resistance in the way of social transformation could be overcome by means of our own local dances, Mustafa Kemal

requested Selim Sırrı Tarcan to design a choreography in which women and men could perform together in *zeybek* dances.

In fact, totally ignoring his doctors' prohibitions soon before his death, for the sake of highlighting the role of cultural values at the time of protecting the unity and integrity of the country as well as maintaining the Young Republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk wanted not only to perform a show of force with his *zeybek* dance, viewed as a symbol of heroism and courage, against the foreign powers, waiting for the news of his death, but also to attract the attention to the richness of the local values that could be held with pride at the time of integration of the Independent Republic of Turkey into the world.

Through his last dance (*Sarı Zeybek*), which he had performed before his last journey, the Grand Commander, who once more effectively emphasized the essential role of the local values in establishing the original image that could ensure the transition from the local to the universal by means of the historical and cultural background, highlighted the importance of the necessity to raise the level of social awareness in many of his discourses so as to spread the understanding that identifies art and artists with civilization. It was also reminded that development in the artistic understanding of the country's people was only related to their level of awareness.

Societies with developed aesthetic understanding of arts could encourage their artists to produce qualified and original works, contributing to the spread of the assertion that the art must be an indispensable part of life. At this point, it is essential to define the contemporary policies of publishing with the aim of spreading arts into the social life, rather than support the ones that could deteriorate the artistic vision of the society.

## CONCLUSION

The necessity of dance could stand out not only in the process of westernization, but also in the conservation of the traditional values. Therefore, the important point is to meet the prerequisite for a correct and appropriate abstraction in such a way to preserve the balance in between. At this point, instead of the understanding that aims to convert the modern human being into a monotype under the guise of westernization, we must try to perpetuate world cities similar to the model of old Istanbul cultivated with a pluralist understanding and world peace that could ensure both leading and conserving a life of authenticities and cultural riches.

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