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The Turkish Folk Theatre

Some significant aspects of Turkish traditional improvisatory theatre, the folk theatre with reference to *Köse* plays, and the popular Theatre with reference to *Ortaoyunu*, the Turkish *commedia dell'arte*.

By

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Ankara

The improvisatory theatre in Turkey developed in two different completely social environments. One, the folk theatre tradition, in villages in rural areas; the other, the popular theatre tradition, in the big towns, but chiefly in Istanbul, the capital of the Ottoman Empire. I shall not attempt a historical study of both traditions, nor even a full description of the various genres involved. I essay rather to evoke and describe comparatively the spirit and the technique of performances between these two traditions and try to illustrate them, the former with *Köse* type plays which can be found in Iran, Azarbaijan, Iraq and also among some ethnic groups in the Empire, the latter by *Ortaoyunu*.

Although the two traditions seem at first comparison as far apart as two poles, we know that, far apart as the poles are, they are each a part of our cultural traditions, and are not in essential spirit in their deeper meaning quite as different as external characteristics suggest. A brief comparison of these two would show that both theatres are *ex tempore*, that both theatres pledge no allegiance to literature, or to writing of any kind. Both are anti-writing, anti-author. In both theatres the action gains in naturalness and vividness by spontaneity; in both the language is simple, direct and strong; in both no theatre building or playhouse is used, performances are held in an arena at ground level. And this level-ground acting has a flexible character and helps in creating closes ties between the actors and the audience. Both generally speaking are stationary performances. But folk tradition has more ambulatory scenes, whereas, as we are going to illustrate further, popular theatre tradition also has occasionally processional, ambulatory performances. Although highly different in presentation techniques and conventions, both theatres have almost the same genres, such as puppetry, story telling

(telling a story by acting), dramatic dances and rudimentary plays by live actors, all embodying an essentially dramatic principle. This last, *Ortaoyunu*, is the main topic of the present paper. Both traditions make use of butaphoric phallus, a common attribute of all folk and popular theatre, deeply rooted in the rural phallic cults as well as in scenic arts. Both are boisteriously naive. Both use minimal props and sets. Also in both traditions all roles are played by male actors, or vice versa in a women's assembly male roles are played by women.

On the other hand there are certain differences. In the folk theatre tradition actors are not professional in any sense of the word, and folk theatre can make a whole village community take part in the performance, both as participants and spectators. Whereas in the popular theatre tradition they are fully professional, yet have nearly always had a secondary occupation which provides the major part of the performer's income. Though some few derive a major part of their income from their art. A striking difference in the two traditions would be the degree of improvisation. Since the folk theatre tradition mostly has its origin in rituals, in certain parts the acting as well as the speaking exhibit a certain rate of constancy. Yet side by side with the strong traditional elements and beliefs in calendar customs and rituals, a love of novelty and experimentation leads the peasants to an incredible number of variants of the fixed themes, even from year to year within the same region, in which they draw inspiration from the times, the place, the topic of the day, adopting it to the existing traditional patterns. In these plays they act and speak in an extemporaneous manner with more freedom. On the other hand in the popular theatre tradition there is more freedom in improvisation, every performance varies at each presentation, seeming different at every performance, a brilliant ephemeral result born of the moment and for the moment. Yet certain stock phrases, songs, verses, rhymed couplets, jokes, certain opening and closing formulas, are really fixed. Before the performance actors talk it over among themselves, and an unwritten scenario explains only what each scene is about, what each actor is to do and no more. So in a way they rehearse perfunctorily the treatment and termination of scenes. Each actor invents a number of jokes and tricky comic turns whenever a scene drags. As each performer renders a paraphrase of an imaginary 'master copy', conscious selection and the vagaries of memory will ensure that each rendering differs somewhat from previous performances. Because of the flexible and open form of the popular theatre tradition, the sequence and order of the scenes and passages often vary and they build up a montage of varied scenes on the spur of the moment.

This brings us to the third important point of difference between

both traditions. In the folk theatre tradition these semi-plays may be seen as a rudimentary form of acting, but these exhibitions cannot be considered as true theatre because in their performance there is not much telling of a sustained story or unfolding of a plot. Whereas the popular theatre tradition is a form of professional theatre.

A fourth difference lies in the origin and degree of survival in both traditions. Folk theatre tradition goes back to its prehistoric antiquity. Although with the development of organized communal life, each community has endowed them with their own local color and originality and the pattern and ritual of culture have undergone a corresponding change, folk plays have never died in the rural areas, even today with the emigration of the rural population to big towns or to work outside Turkey, and the negative influence of mass media such as radio and television. On the other hand the growth of the Turkish popular theatre tradition is more recent, and has absorbed the remains of native tradition of a rather later date, and with the advent of western theatre and the growth of western stage acting it declined and disappeared at the turn of this century. The condemnation and disdain of some intellectuals champions of Westernization, further discouraged it.

Now a few words on the growth of both traditions. The Anatolian population has lived for several hundred years in touch with other entirely different civilization and yet has managed to preserve its purity. The Anatolian Turkish peasants have an inheritance both their ancestors, on one hand from the Central Asian Turkish culture, on the other hand from the people who from times immemorial inhabited the Anatolian plateau. So some elements in their plays stem from the practices of Central Asian shamanism, others from religious ceremonials of the people of the land prior to the arrival of the Turkish people in Anatolia in the eleventh century. This element native to Anatolia especially includes agricultural magic fertility rites, the cult of the great mother goddess, her worship including rites and ceremonies connected with the death and resurrection of the male god (of Adonis, of Attis, of Osiris, of Dionysos) loved by her both as her son and husband. Two recurrent themes or a combination of the two are constant central incidents and both are agricultural rites: first the slaying of the vegetation spirit or divinity and its resurrection for a new year; secondly the abduction of a girl and her return. Singly or combined these are symbolic of the yearly cycle of the disappearance of the seed beneath the ground in the fall of the year and its re-emergence in the spring.

These are the most constant and characteristic incidents in hundreds of these semi-plays which are regular calendar festivals, and which are so wide-spread that they can be found in almost any Turkish village, from

far east to far west and from north to south Anatolia; and abundant parallels can be found elsewhere. A further characteristic of these plays is that various animale are represented by dressed-up men.

We can distinguish in the folk theatre tradition of Anatolia the following types and categories, some of which are rough-and ready entertainments for mere amusement, and divertissements, though in many of them the allegorical notions of rituals can be recognised, and in some of the ritualistic functions are carefully maintained and they retain the popular belief in their original efficacy on nature in fulfilling certain needs closely bound to the life of the community:¹

—Skits from every day life and domestic themes, such as marriage, quarrels between the bride and mother-in-law, or between husband and wife, polygamy, sterile women, going to towns or pilgrimages and of similar nature. Some mirror social evils.

—Parodies of trades and professions. These are skits parodying the various trades and professions, mostly satiric, and their barbes are directed chiefly against authorities such as judges. The most widespread professions are barbers, butchers, millers, tinsmiths, teachers, brick-makers, etc.

—Agrarian skits, which are on the themes of sowing, harvesting, ploughing etc. and also the extermination of animals such as boars and on the measuring fields and determining the boundaries of a field for ownership. In connection with these are skits which are performed to bring about certain natural phenomena favorable for agriculture such as rain, or causing the sun to appear.

—Plays on shepherds and herdsmen, in short pastoral skits. The rites are more on the welfare and increase of their flocks and herds, to ensure prolific ewes so that many lambs may be born and much wool at shearing. Rites against the raid of wolves on their flocks and herds.

—Plays arising out of tales, legends. The most widespread are plays based on some episodes of Köroğlu legend. Even among the Greek communities in the past living on Black Sea Coast in their rituel plays *Monoeroi*, we find this legendary hero, Köroğlu.²

—Victimizing and practical jokes, horse plays and dumb show plays. There are a number of plays of semi-dramatic character victimizing some onlookers. Some of these plays are dumb show plays in which players must not laugh or speak.

—And primitive puppet plays and story telling either in prose narrative,

1. On these folk dramas see Metin And, *A History of Theatre and Popular Entertainment in Turkey* (Ankara 1963-64), pp. 53-59.

2. C. A. Romaïos, *Cultes Populaires de la Thrace*, Athens 1949, p. 161.

verse and for the latter with an accompaniment of musical instrument.

An interesting form, widespread both in Anatolia and its neighbouring cultures, is the *Köse* type play. *Köse*, a loan word from Persian, means a beardless or thinly bearded man, besides other meanings. Although abundant plays bear the title of *Köse*, our knowledge of this type is extremely meagre and confusing. It seems to be not only a ritual, but also the mythical part of it, since *Köse* has great popularity as one of the central characters of Turkish popular tales. The two characters who most frequently appear in popular Turkish folk tales are *Köse* and *Keloglan* (meaning bald boy) who is a sympathetic peasant boy, stupid, naive in some tales, yet who always wins at the end, making his fortune or succeeding by ruses and cunning. His counterpart *Köse* is a more negative type, not sympathetic, a trickster, at times treacherous, at times cruel, vicious, at times a mysterious, supernatural character who injures people; he is an intriguer who lacks any human feeling.

Considering *Köse* as a character type in folk tales and the central character or title in the folk plays there still remain many points to be explained. Although in the tales *Köse*'s characteristics show constancy, plays all bearing the title of *Köse* show certain discrepancies. Though there are many variations in details, but we shall try to find some points in common. Before I give various examples from Anatolian Turkey, I shall endeavour to illustrate from Azarbaijan, Iran and Iraq. Ivar Lassy in his book describes a ceremony for the Year End ceremony among the Azarbaijan Turks of Caucasia,³ the masquarades called *Kos-Kosa*, and the chief acting person *kosa*. He presumes it is the Arabic word for an ingenious or cunning woman. Another character is *hekim* or physician with a number of attendants. *Kosa* wears a furcoat turned inside out, has a tail attached to her back, her face covered with grinning masks, and her head ornamented with a high cap shaped like a sugar-loaf, garnished with bells. With her attendants when visit houses, and when refused admittance, she wishes for the head of the family concerned the blessing of twelve daughters, and then proceeds to another house. In the houses where she is admitted she dances before the people in the house, her attendants accompanying her with music and singing appropriate songs in chorus. The last words being said, she falls upon the floor simulating death. The physician wearing a mask with a stick in his hand, recites some lines. *Köse* returns to life. When people ask what she wants, she asks for some gift, and if a gift is given she will bless the house with a son, otherwise they will have twelve daughters. She finishes with a dance. This is repeated in every house, and the collected

3. Ivar Lassy, *The Muharrem Mysteries*, Helsingfors 1916, pp. 226-34.

gifts are distributed among the group. It is obviously another death and resurrection theme, familiar to all. The old woman evidently impersonates the old year, symbolizing that the year is about to die and then come to life again. In Persia the last ten days of the year form the 'Season of the Old Woman', which, as its name implies, is something very unpleasant and disagreeable. It is not only the termination of the year but also cold. More recently two Azarbaijan versions of *Kos-Kosa* (one a version from Lengeran) have been published in the local dialect printed in the Cyrillic alphabet.⁴ These two *Kos-Kosa* are similar to the version depicted by Lassý, yet new elements occur in one of them, namely at the end of the play two *köses* appear, and another person brings with him a goat (a man dressed up as a goat). They bargain about buying the goat, with symbolic reference to winter and summer. Both *köses* claim the goat. There is a fight between the two *köses* over the goat, and meanwhile the goat escapes. The addition of the goat to the play has a special significance to which we shall return later when we give examples of *Köse* type plays from Anatolian Turkey.

In ancient Persia a festival was celebrated about the vernal equinox called the *Rukub al Kosa* or *Kosa Barnishin* or *Kosa nishin* meaning 'the ride or sitting of a beardless or thinly bearded man'.⁵ It is also called *Bahar cesm* (spring festival), the rejoining at the departure of winter and the coming of spring. It is claimed that a similar festival existed in Samarkand in the 7th and 8th centuries.⁶ An old beardless one-eyed man who represents the departing winter rides on an ass or a mule, holding a fan and a crow, and in some accounts a scourge, and fans himself as he complains of the heat. As he parades through the streets, people sprinkle him with icy water and hot water. In some accounts he carries by his side a pot full of reddened water, and filth. Each sloop-keeper is expected to give him a piece of money. If they delay giving him the money, he bespatters them with the contents of the pot. He has

4. Ehlman Ahundow, *Azerbeycan Folkloru Antalogyasi*, Baku 1968, I, pp. 224–27.

5. James Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, London 1955, IX, pp. 402–405; Mas'udi, *Prairies d'or*, (edited and translated by Barbier de Maynard), Paris 1861–77, III, 413 ff; Al Biruni, *Chronology of Ancient Nations* (translated by Sechau), London 1879, pp. 199–226;

Anquetil du Perron, *Zend-Avesta*, Paris 1771, pp. 574–81;

Thomas Hyde, *Historia religionis veterum Persarum*, Oxford 1700, chapter XIX;

Waldermar Liungman, *Traditionswanderungen, Euphrat-Rhein: Studien zur Geschichte der Volksbräuche*, Hamina/Helsinki 1937, I, 352 ff.

6. W. Eberhard, "Die Kultur der alten zentral-und westasiatischen Völker", *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* (Berlin) Bd. 73, p. 236.

the authority to enter into every shop and house, and if they do not give him the tribute he has the privilege of seizing the effects of every shop. We shall see below in the Ottoman festivals a parallel of this asking tributes from every shop with authority. He is escorted by the servants of the king or the governor. From the first prayer to the second prayer the amount of the receipts is his property. But his sovereignty and power are short-lived, and he suddenly disappears, for after this time the first person he meets in the street may severely beat him. It is obviously the expulsion of winter. The mock king or temporary king or substitute king has its parallels in different ages and different places. Many authors tend to compare this to the Babylonian *Sacaea*, and also one can find it in Anatolia among the Armenian communities,⁷ in Cambodia, in Sumatra, Lhasa (Tibet), in various parts of Africa.

We find a *Köse* type play at Khorsabat, Northern Iraq,⁸ which is more similar to the Turkish examples given below, yet its function differs from the year-end ceremonies. Shortly, there are two characters, one dressed as a woman, the other wearing a high pointed basket as headgear, a goatskin round his shoulders and a bell tied to his girdle, and he carries a heavy stick. Both have their faces blackened. First they dance, then the man lies down on the ground and at once the woman shows signs of distress, beating her breast and showing he is dead by lifting his legs and arms. When one of the spectators throws a bucket of water over the dead man, at once both performers spring to their feet and continue their dancing. Sometimes the man rides on his stick like a horse. This is a rain rite. And then they go from house to house and each household must give them something, mostly food, and afterwards the whole village gathers and feasts together, praying for rain. If a house refuses to give while the performance is taking place at the door, the other villagers will enter the house and smash everything they find. Some villages in the mountains execute the dance in full daylight and wear only the long false beard of goat's hair but also artificial tusks made of bone or wood. The most important of all is the song which accompanies the dance. The first lines are:

Kozbarata, kozbarata
Rain comes, rain comes
.....

Here the observer explains the *kozbarata* is a complex word in which

7. See V. Btoyani, *Hay Zoghovrtagan Khagher* ("The Armenian Folk Games"), Erivan 1963, pp. 23-42; 86-89; 97.

8. H. Frankfort, "A Tammuz ritual in Kurdistan", *IRAQ*, 1/pt. 2, November 1934, pp. 137-145.

koz means an adult man who cannot grow beard, and *barata* should mean woman.

Now we shall give some examples from Anatolian Turkey. One I have already published, just to single out the remnants of Central Asian shamanistic practices, a play called *Köse Oyunu* from Kars.⁹ It combines both the theme of death and revivification and the abduction of a girl and her return. In this play there are two brothers (both wearing a sheepskin), a 'girl' and a man dressed up as a pig. After the dead is restored to life and the abducted girl returns, for rejoicing there is a simulation of a pig sacrifice. Also from Kars there is another *Köse Oyunu*, but extremely different from the first one, the only element in common between the two is that the second has also a pig in it. This is more like the standard type of *Köse* type play. The chief character *Köse* wears inside-out a coat made of twelve sheepskins, he has a belt made of straw, his back is padded like a hunch, his turban made of bed-linen, his face is whitened with flour, and he has a beard made of black goat hairs. He claims his animals (imaginary) from other people, and when they do not return his animals he makes each as a penalty cry like the respective animals. Finally he demands his pig, but since nobody can imitate a pig, instead they give him a pig.

Eastern Anatolia is full of such plays, and most of them are performed at the end of the year, or more often on the turning point of the termination of the coldest days. One is called *Köse ile Gelin* (The Beardless Man and the Bride).¹⁰ The principal characters are a 'woman' whose face is covered, a young man with white moustache and straw hat, and a second man called *Köse*, who is disguised as a bear by means of straw. His face is covered with white wool and painted with red brick-dust. The first young man speaks with an Arabic accent. Members of the audience pretend to attack the two men and try to kidnap the bride, but the two men defend her with their sticks. During this *melée* *Köse*, who carries a shepherd's crook, hooks it around the bride's leg and pulls her down and he falls on top of her, simulating sexual intercourse.

From Iğdir there is *Kosa Oyunu* (or *Kosa and the Bride*) which is acted during *cille*, towards the end of February, these coldest days are called *cille* or *celle*, and the popular calendar it is called for both the coldest days or hottest days of the year. An interesting point is that that the word *cile* means the health of cattle and flocks, usually the pea-

9. See Metin And, *A Pictorial History of Turkish Dancing*, Ankara 1976, pp. 19-21.

10. For a photo of this play see my *A History . . .*, illustration no. 114.

sants are anxious that their animals' health (*cile*) should be good so as to survive the cold days of the year (*cille*). The young man who plays Köse wears a sheepskin turned inside out and hat made of felt, his face is whitened with flour, and wears two horns. Around his waist is a belt of straw, and his back is padded to make a hunch. He has a big stick in his hand, and his beard is made of black goat hair. Another young man is dressed up as bride whose head is covered with a scarf with a small round mirror on it. Köse puts on some sheep bells which tinkle as he walks. Attending them is a bagpipe player, a guard and a donkey, making a group of five. They go from house to house giving various performances of small skits, and dance with the householder. And from each house they collect food and money, which they take away on their donkey. After their tour is ended they distribute their collection. But in each village more than one group was found, so when two rival groups encounter each other they quarrel. The winning group confiscates the collection of the other group. Usually small children fear Köse, and their mothers frighten their children by saying, "Köse is coming".

In Van, again in Eastern Anatolia, the *Köse* play is done on 20 February which is *cille*, the coldest day. There is Köse, his wife, a tambourine player, and several men dressed as wolf, a jackal, and a fox and so on. They make a round of the houses, and collect food. It is believed that the first house they enter will be prosperous that year. A recurring action is that they abduct the wife of Köse, and each time that makes him very sad and he weeps.

Another version of *Köse* and the Bride is from Dogubayazit, Eastern Anatolia. It is done 17th February and lasts three days. Köse is old and hunchbacked representing the old year. Since he is beardless he wears a false beard and he carries a stick. Another young man represent the New Year and a third man a bride, but the latter does not speak during the performance, and a few men accompanying them collect food. First there is a mock marriage between Köse and the Bride, the bride is very reluctant. They dance. Suddenly Köse falls down. The bride tries to revive him without success, so they carry him out. This time the young groom arrives. The man who conducts the play introduce him to the assembly by saying that as the old man is dead, he, 'the New Year', will marry this beautiful girl. Everybody rejoices and each house gives them some gifts.

Not all the *Köse* plays are from Eastern Anatolia. Now another version of it from Central Anatolia, to be precise from the Cicekdag (Kirsehir) villages. It is called *Köse Gezdirmek* (Köse is taken for a walk). It is performed in the first or second week in January which is

midwinter, when the young of sheep and goats show signs of life in their mothers' wombs. There is Köse (who sears a sheepskin and has a tail made of broom, his face is blackened, and he carries a stick), the Bride, and a man dressed up as fox. Also there are three tambourine players. They make their tour to each house and in each house Köse stimulates death and the Bride sings an elegy, the wording of which emphasises that Köse is dead and that some money or food should be given. As soon as these are given, Köse is restored to life, all the players dance to celebrate the revivification of Köse, and the food is distributed among them.

There are some folk plays with the title of *Köse*, but they are mere parodies. Here are two examples, one again from Kirsehir. It is played in a women's assembly, attacking polygamy. There are two women players, one disguised as Köse, and he is lying about to die. Each of his wives ask what 'he' will leave her before he dies. Köse answers them with funny replies. When eventually he dies, a quarrel ensues between the two wives. In another version of it from Beypazar, which differs from the Kirsehir version, instead of two wives, Köse has eight or ten wives, each claiming her share from Köse's inheritance.

An interesting point about the *Köse* type folk plays in Anatolia is that they combine the rite for the Year End ceremony with the pastoral ceremonies for the fecundity of cattle and flocks. They are mainly performed in the coldest days of the Winter, either the 17th of February, or sometimes 15th, 18th or the 24th of February. Etymologically the word and derivation of *Köse* has other meanings which are associated with ram and he-goat. The word for ram is *koc*; *kös* is the bell which is carried by the last animal in the flock; *kösem* or *kösemen* is a he-goat that assists the shepherd, or the ram or he-goat which leads the flock; *körüz* is a one-year-old kid; and many other similar meanings. In some places in Anatolia the rite for putting the ram to the ewes is called *Köseme*. In an interesting New Year play from Elazığ there are two characters, the husband and his 'wife'. The husband is called *Teke* (meaning he-goat).

The association of the word *Köse* with he-goat can be found also in other ethnic groups in Anatolia. For instance again in the folk plays of Greek communities the chief characters are called *momoerois*, a word constructed from *mos* which means fool, idiot, and *geros* which means old. This old fool frightens the children. He is also called *Kosia*, from the Turkish word *Koc* meaning ram, but the Greek usage of the word means he-goat, and this character wears a goat-skin and imitates the movements of a he-goat, and he carries some red dye which is used when simulating a sacrifice in lieu of blood.¹¹ Among Armenians in Anatolia

11. Romaïos, p. 160.

one of the observances for causing rain is to make the Goat Man (*Keci Adam*), which is a guiser with a goat mask and goat skin, or a goat's head is stuck on a long pole. When the Goat Man passes through the streets water is splashed on him from the houses.¹² And there are great number of folk dances of the Teke (he-goat) type which imitates a goat's movements. In fact by pictorial evidence we know that goat dancing existed in Iran. One drawing found in the Public Library in Leningrad shows three figures, completely dressed up as goats, imitating the movements and antics of the animals. In another in the British Museum which is believed to be a free copy of the first one there are only two goat dancers. The third one dated 1613, in the Freer Gallery of Art in Washington, shows two goat dancers.¹³

Before I proceed to the second tradition of improvised theatre, that is popular tradition and chiefly *Ortaoyunu* I must try to answer a question: Was there any inter-connection between the folk theatre tradition and the popular theatre tradition? As we have already emphasized at the beginning of this paper, because of the fundamental differences in their functions, in their forms and in their social environment they developed independently cannot have the faintest resemblance to each other. Yet in some instances there might have been some indirect interconnection. For instance, a folk ritual play from Tokat villages called 'the Stag Play', based on the death and magical resurrection theme,¹⁴ has its counterparts especially in the 17th and 18th century in Istanbul, and Edirne where in the skits performed the central character was a stag, and the central theme was the death and resurrection of this stag.¹⁵

We can assume *Ortaoyunu* of a particular form and its title *Ortaoyunu* to be only quite recent, from the beginning of the 19th century. In order to place the final *Ortaoyunu* form in its historical setting, I must begin with a short description of the popular genres that contributed to the flowering of *Ortaoyunu*. Certain conventions and themes from the oral narrative tradition by the professional story-tellers, puppetry, shadow theatre, jesters and clowns, masked grotesques dancers, trade guild skits and others made important contributions to its form, besides actual stories and thematic material. Among this great variety of theatrical Turkish entertainment that may have contributed to the development

12. See Btoyani, p. 147; 259; 165-66.

13. For the fourth and fifth examples showing performers attired as goats, see Richard Ettinghausen, "The Dance with Zoomorphic Masks and Other forms of entertainment seen in Islamic Art", *Arabic and Islamic Studies in Honor of Hamilton A. R. Gibb*, Leiden 1965, pp. 212-14.

14. See *A History*

15. See *A History*

of *Ortaoyunu* were early jesters and clowns. The early jesters' roles were not limited to formal performances but also included making satirical observations, telling jokes and stories, and impersonating and imitating various figures and animals. These jesters and entertainers were known by various names such as *nedim*, *sirinkar*, *mukallid*, *mudhik* and others. One of these names is curious, *bineva*, a Persian word with a different meaning. Less information is to be had about the rise of the ancient jesters. The following generalizations are based on an available, contemporary source of the 15th century.¹⁶ This manuscript gives a description of a *bineva*, a famous contemporary jesters by the name of Aseli, during Sultan Bayazit's time (1481–1512). It describes Aseli and his fellow jesters riding on asses, attired in bizarre costumes and masks, and holding come sheets of paper from which they were reading a sort of satirical joke called *zort*. Sultan Bayazit invited Aseli to his court, and he asked him to take part in a contest of wits between his own court jester and Aseli. In this Aseli was the winning party, and was rewarded by the Sultan. So we can understand from this account that comic dialogue existed in the 15th century. Incidentally, Turkish comic dialogues have two opposite poles, we can term the first one the 'foil' as one of the party by his lines gives his counterpart an occasion to make a joke, a witty remark, some repartee and the other is the principle whose reply contains the crack, wit, joke. So in every form of comic dialogue (for instance in shadow theatre Hacivat has the function of 'foil' and Karagöz the principal comic function, or in *Ortaoyunu* Pisekar has to function of aiding his counterpart to use his wits and his counterpart Kavuklu makes the jokes, and this how a dialogue develops. Some of these jesters capitalized on their wits and insight to become permanent entertainers in the Sultan's courts. Their dialogues tend to spread the contents thinly by employing a variety of padding devices. They filch sallies, charades, riddles, metaphors, repetitions, cacaphones, antitheses and others.

It is unquestionable that the shadow theatre or Karagöz¹⁷ exerted great influence on *Ortaoyunu*, the borrowing between the Karagöz and *Ortaoyunu* was mutual the Karagöz repertory and its form became a basic structural element in *Ortaoyunu*. Another element which laid the groundwork for the development of *Ortaoyunu* was the *curcunabaz*, -masked, grotesque dancers—ant their secondary kinds the *tulumcu* and *cin askeri*: These are great in numbers, men with or without staves, at

16. *Letaif-i Zati*. Ankara Maarif Kitapligi, MS no. 528/3

17. For a detailed and well illustrated study on the Turkish shadow theatre see my *Karagöz. Turkish Shadow Theatre*, Ankara 1975.

the end of which were bladders filled with air. Usually led by a man who rode a small donkey all in comical dresses, sometimes their hands and arms concealed in their loose and long dresses, they would cavort, dance, somersault, or dance upside down with their feet in the air, with their bladders, called *tulum*, they would strike at inquisitive spectators in order to drive them off, and at times gave humorous impersonations. Sometimes in their processions they would display a giant size phallus, with which they would salute their spectators. The *Ortaoyunu* finally presented on the 'stage', portraying a story evolved out of the combination of mimicry, dance and comic dialogue and the transformation of the clown into actors. Especially in the 17th century the public and professional entertainers were very numerous in number and in their performances. Evliya Celebi, the famous 17th century traveller refers to them in his ten volumes of travel accounts and, others also refer to them. Their accounts are also supported by the evidence of hundreds of contemporary miniatures which show their kind of skills, their social status, their organizations and other matters.

A parallel between these Ottoman entertainers and Persian *Lutis* is striking. From the little I know about the Persian *temasha*, they perform in a way very close to antecedent forms of *Ortaoyunu*. For instance like the following description:¹⁸ In a *Temasha* play a garden in summer time is shown. Two gardeners, with garments of yellow sheepskin about their loins but otherwise naked, discourse about their gardens. The names of the characters in the play are Baghir, a rich old fellow, father of a very pretty girl, whom he screens from any possibility of male admiration, and a very cunning young man named Najaf, who is in love with Baghir's daughter. The two gardeners begin with rival praise of their horticulture. Their rival commendations end of course in a free fight, in which the gardeners use alternately their fists and the implements of their labour, until Baghir gets the worst of it, and proposes drinking some wine. He gives money to Najaf who hastens to buy the wine. Then a kind of comic action begins, with the repeated recall of Najaf who makes several false exists in hurried excitement to procure the drink, and is stopped again and again by Baghir, who now begs him not to forget the kebab of roast lamb, to remember the sweetmeats, now to be careful about the dessert and so on, until Najaf becomes tired of running to and at the command of his master, stops both his ears, and scampers off the stage in sheer despair. Left alone, Baghir prepares himself for the feast with a bold parody of the many religious rites used by the Mol-

18. James Mew, "The Modern Persian Stage", *The Fournightly Review*, LIX, Jan.-June 1896, pp. 903-04.

las, or priests, on such an important occasion. Najaf returns with the banquet and enlivens the repast with a lute. The various stages of drunkenness are admirably imitated. Baghir, the born reveller, falls asleep at last. Then Najaf, who has only simulated intoxication, runs off with Baghir's daughter, and a triumphal chant of love concludes the piece. This short description and some data available from Medjid Rezvani's book¹⁹ on the *baqqal bazi*, performed by *lutiha-yi sar khwancha-yi ustad baqqal*, show certain affinities with *Ortaoyunu*. But similar to *Ortaoyunu* in its later form called *Tuluat* theatre (the improvised theatre) which is a middle ground between the traditional *Ortaoyunu* and the European theatre, especially in its characters. *Tuluat* theatre introduced a new element into Turkish traditional popular theatre, the proscenium stage, the set consisting of painted drop, wings and borders. Topicalized situations were borrowed from some plays in the repertoire of the western theatres and changed to suit the particular style of the traditional theatre with its extempore acting.

Were there performances like *taht-i hovzi*, that is performances given on a platform over a water pool? We can simply answer to this question by saying that we have no record of it, yet we have abundant evidences, both written and pictorial, on performances on water, on large-sized rafts, beautifully ornamented while the spectators were located either on the shores or on boats nearby.²⁰

Another type of Turkish play-form which served as model for the emergence of *Ortaoyunu* were the ambulatory and processional plays, done usually during the public festivals, some lasting several weeks, on the occasion of court weddings, circumcision ceremonies of princes on the accession of a new ruler, triumphs in a war, and on other occasions. Usually they were performed by trade guilds, on elaborately decorated carts. Some trade guilds also performed their plays at initiation or promotion ceremonies of their members. One such ambulatory type performed during public festivals we can call 'street plays'. These farces were performed in the streets where the onlookers took part and a pre-arranged comic situation may have been worked out with considerable improvisation and many practical jokes on the spur of the moment in front of shops and houses by impersonating such officials as the watchman, the tax-collector or the treasure hunter by teasing shop-keepers or householders with practical jokes, or threatening them, as in the skit of the treasure hunter, where they pretend that there is a treasure hidden, and they attempt to dig with pickaxes and shovels in front of the shops,

19. *Le théâtre et la danse en Iran*, Paris 1962, pp. 111-14.

20. See my *A Pictorial*, pp. 92-93; 96-97, pictures no 82, 86 and 90A/B.

so that a tribute or blackmail money may be collected from them. This is reminiscent of *Kusaj Barnishin* two respects. First, for a short period—in this case the duration of the festival—most unlawful actions were tolerated; secondly, based on this temporary authority some tributes are extorted. Even dared to impersonate such high officials as Grand Vizier, the chief officer of the Janissary corps or the chief of police forces.²¹

Those skits had the greatest bearing on the emergence of *Ortaoyunu* since in them various characters were impersonated, ridiculing chiefly state dignitaries, poking fun at them. For instance Sultan Abdulaziz encouraged *Ortaoyunu* players to ridicule some statesmen such as Ali Pasha, Fuat Pasha, Yusuf Kamil Pasha and others, all Grand Viziers or viziers.²²

Another problem is that it is generally believed that *Ortaoyunu* is fundamentally a variant of *commedia dell'arte* and certainly it exhibits astonishing similarities to *commedia dell'arte*. The immediate explanation of this is that the non-literary theatre of the *mimus* actors was the common possession of the entire Mediterranean world including of course the Byzantine and Ottoman Empires. Also *commedia dell'arte* could have been introduced in the Ottoman Empire by the Italians with whom there was a very close rapport, or by Jewish emigrants, who came to Turkey by the thousands from Portugal and Spain at the end of the 15th and 16th century, when *commedia dell'arte* had already been introduced to Spain. The latter is more likely since from that time to the end of the 19th century most of the public entertainers were Jewish. Although the native population had already their own popular entertainments, with the arrival of Jewish actors with their historic skill and repertoire contributed to the *Ortaoyunu* form and enriched it. Etymologically also there is some evidence for this. For instance the ground level acting area in *Ortaoyunu* is called *palanga*, which derives from Spanish *palanque* with almost the same meaning. Also the word *Ortaoyunu* has several interpretations, at least four, of which the most common and acceptable is that *Orta* literally means middle—middle both in place since it is a theatre in the round, and in time, because like an interlude it is played in between other forms of entertainments. To the four different interpretation a fifth can be added which would be the Spanish word *auto*, generally a religious and morality play, but also used

21. See Baron de Tott, *Mémoires sur les Turcs et les Tartares*, I, Amsterdam, 1785, pp. 182–10 and S. Baker, *Musleiman Adeti or A Description of the customs and manners of the Turks with a sketch of their literature*, London 1796, pp. 34–39.

22. For parallels of this see *Karagöz*, pp. 67–69.

one act secular plays. So Jewish emigrants from Spain might have called their plays auto added the Turkish word for play *Oyun(u)*, forming *auto oyunu*, and by Turkish pronunciation this could have been transformed into *Ortaoyunu*. However the usage of the word *Ortaoyunu* is fairly recent, the first record of it is 1834, prior, this form was called under various names such as *Kol Oyunu* (company play), *Meydan Oyunu* (plays in the round), or *Taklit Oyunu* (mimicry play).

Here are some conventional and structural features of *Ortaoyunu*: Plots were ready made and required little or no adaptation with few details that could be changed; each men of the company specialized in certain roles or well-defined types, and was categorized accordingly; usually actors chose the stock character that best fitted them. Although it was an improvised theatre, to round out his characterization, in order to give it more substance, each actor always memorized many assorted, unrelated bits which he could insert as often as convenient in the improvised dialogues. As already mentioned, *Ortaoyunu* was presented on a level ground arena, this naked 'stage' achieves spacelessness. The same spot might be transformed into a different place by a word or an action. The women of the audience sat on one side, usually behind temporarily built lattices, the men squatted on the other three sides, the boys huddled near the edge of the area. The actors did not have to disappear completely when their parts were finished. The *Ortaoyunu* actors were superbly aware of the four-sides audience, and the audience felt intimacy with the performance and could view from any of the four sides, since it was a single site without partition or barrier of any kind. With minimal sets and props it created a world in which the spectator's imagination had free rein. When the hero climbed up on a chair the audience could understand that he had reached the second floor of a house, from where he described the view vividly. With gesture and a sound, the actor suggested the opening of a bolt and as the actor entered the room he stepped across threshold. Thus *Ortaoyunu* was an anti-illusionistic and presentational theatre, achieving this by music, dancing, songs which broke the illusion and established a distance between the action and characters and the audience. The female roles were acted by men, since for centuries women had been cloistered and not allowed to appear on the stage. Male actresses spoke in *falsetto* without sounding harsh.

Some intellectuals in the 19th century, champions of western culture, refuse to support *Ortaoyunu* because they found primitive and vulgar, and admittedly dialogues were replete with sexual and obscene jokes. So gradually *Ortaoyunu* lost its traditional color and vigour. And with westernization and the opening to outside influences Turkey moved away from its indigenous dramatic spirits.

* * *

The foregoing overview and description of *Ortaoyunu* may have seemed to the reader of disappointing shortness. In fact I have not attempted to provide an exhaustive treatment of the subject, which is beyond the scope of my paper, but I have confined myself to summarize the results of my research on *Ortaoyunu*, already published in my books and in articles appeared in a variety of journals. The reader who might seek to get more information on *Ortaoyunu* and on the many points not touched here, is advised to consult these publications.²³ Yet to remedy this shortness to a certain degree I am offering below a long quotation from a vivid and detailed account extracted from a traveller's book of the first half of 19th century. This eye witness, Miss Julie Pardoe,²⁴ who was present at the marriage festivities of the Princess Mihrimah, the daughter of Sultan Mahmut II, and the circumcision festivities of two princes in 1836. Since Mrs. Pardoe is a foreigner and this was her first experience with *Ortaoyunu*, it should not be surprising that some distortions and inaccuracies occurring in her description, especially when compared her account with that of 'the festival book' written by Lebib, who describes the same festival.²⁵ The reason of my preference for Miss Pardoe's account, instead of drawing on numerous earlier sources, is twofold: First the date of this account is 1836, the time of the first usage of the word *Ortaoyunu*. Secondly Mrs. Pardoe gives a full programme of a performance of various interludes, alternating in between other entertainments. Here is Miss Pardoe's account:

- p. 123 " Not the slightest effort had been made to level the piece of land thus converted into a temporary theatre, and which was stony and uneven to a degree that must have dis-
- p. 124 concerted any individuals less philosophical than those who were to exhibit their histrionic and terpsichorean talents before the Ottoman Emperor and his Auguste Court. In fact, the whole of the scenic preparations were conducted in so primitive a manner that you saw at once no deceit was intended, and that, if you suffered yourself to be led away by the incidents of the drama, you would not be deluded thereto by any effort of the actors.

The first arrival upon the scene was that of four ragged personages, apparently intended to represent the street porters

23. See my *A History* . . . and for the origin of *Ortaoyunu* see Metin And, "Wie entstand das Türkische Ortaoyunu", *Maske und Kothurn*, XVI (1970), pp. 201-16.

24. Julie Pardoe, *The City of the Sultan*, London 1838, II, pp. 123-136.

25. *Surmâme-i Lebib*, Istanbul University Library. Mss. TV. 6097, 98 ff.

who ply for hire about the quays and markets; and these interesting individuals sustained a long and animated conversation, setting forth the dull condition of the Queen of Cities, in which neither feast, nor festival had been held since the Bairam. Their lamentations at length attracted the attention of a fifth loiterer of the same class, who, joining the group, gave a new tone to the subject by announcing the approaching marriage of the High and Peerless Princess Mihrimah -the daughter of His Sublime Highness Mahmoud the Powerful, The Emperor of the East, and Conqueror of the World!

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The intelligence was received with enthusiasm, and the new comer was encouraged to proceed with his narration; in which he accordingly set forth not only the beauties and virtues of the Imperial Bride, and the high and endearing qualities of her affianced husband, but also gave a *catalogue raisonné* of all the sports and ceremonies which were to be observed on the happy occasion of her nuptials; and it is only fair to believe that he did so with some address, as a murmur of admiration ran through the crowd who were devouring his discourse.

After asserting that the whole universe had been taxed to produce novelties worthy of the illustrious event, he proposed to exhibit to his companions an ingenious machine that had been imported from Europe, and which was to be exhibited by a friend of his own. Hereupon, a sort of buffon was introduced, attended by two men, who fixed a swing with a lattice seat between two slight wooden frames, which they were obliged to support during the remainder of the scene.²⁶

One by one, the respectable worthies whom I have attempted to describe were seated in the swing, and rocked gently backwards and forwards by the proprietor of the show; and during this time an old Jew, with a long white beard and tattered garments, followed by a deformed and hideous dwarf, joined himself to the party, but at a sufficient distance to indicate that he was conscious of his unworthiness to intrude upon their notice.

A mischievous whim suddenly prompted the hilarious Musselmauns to make the quailing dwarf a party in their pastime, and they accordingly placed him in the swing, and amused themselves for a time with his abortive attempts to

26. This is the well known play 'The Swing' from Karagöz repertoire. For a short outline of this scenarios see *Karagöz*, p. 63.

p. 126 escape; but, wearying of the jest, they agreed to replace him by his master; and despite the prayers and terror of the hoary Jew, they compelled him to occupy the crazy seat, which, failing beneath his weight, precipitated him to the ground, where, falling upon his head, he remained apparently lifeless.

At this period of the performance, half a score of the members of the orchestra left their place, and walked demurely out of the ring, in order to raise the body of the murdered man, and convey him away to burial.

Nothing can be conceived more disgusting than the scene that followed; all the actors being actually Jews,²⁷ selected from the very dregs of the people, and compelled to exhibit the degradation of their social state for the amusement of their task-masters. A wretched bier, borne by four men was brought forward, on which the supposed corpse was flung with a haste and indecency betokening strong alarm; and it was about to disappear with its loathsome freight, when its passage was obstructed by a party of police, who, occupying the centre of the path along which it was passing, and remaining erect on its approach, were supposed to awaken in the bosoms of the bearers one of the strongest superstitions of the Jews of Turkey; who, when they are carrying a body to the grave that is met by a Christian or Mohammedan who refuses to bend down and pass under the bier, consider the corpse so contaminated by the contact as to be without the pale of salvation; and, setting down
p. 127 the body under this impression on the spot where the encounter has taken place, they abandon it to the tender mercies of the local authorities.

This whetted and revolting superstition was enacted by the degraded wretches who were hired on the present occasion to expose the abjectness of their people, with all the painful exactness which could delude the spectator into the belief that he beheld a scene of actual and unpremeditated horror. A distracted wife tore off her turban, and plucked out handful of her dishevelled hair; the body was rolled over into the dust: a scuffle ensued between the Jewish rabble and the armed kavasses, in which a few blows were given that appeared to fall more heavily than was altogether necessary to the effect of the scene; and the Jew, recovering from his trance amid the shouting and

27. Mrs. Pardoe erroneously thinks these actors were Jewish. On this occasion they were Moslem Turkish actors impersonating Jews.

yelling of the combatants, was borne off in triumph by his tribe, with a wild chorus that terminated the first act of the drama . . .

p. 128 The retreat of the Jewish party was succeeded by the arrival of a group of ballet dancers, consisting of about a score of youths from fourteen to twenty years of age, dressed in a rich costume of satin, fringed and ribbed with gold, varying in colour, according to the fancy of the wearer

p. 132 Could I have disengaged my carriage from the crowd, I should at once have retired, perfectly satisfied with the specimen I had obtained of the Turkish taste in theatricals; but the *arabas* were standing four deep, and pressed upon from behind by a dense mob; and I was consequently compelled to remain a patient spectator of the whole performance. Intrigues with Greek serving-men, domestic quarrels ending in blows and similarly well-conceived incidents, filled up the canvass, until the end of the second act, when a fresh set of ballet dancers, amounting to nearly one hundred, and clad in the beautiful old Greek dress, entered, and made their bow to the Pashas.

p. 133 During their performance, which was similar to that of the first party, although less gracefully executed, a new feature was added to the exhibition. An attempt at side scenes was evident, though I confess that for the first few minutes I was a loss to imagine the intention of the very primitive machinery that was introduced. A couple of frames, similar to those on which linen is dried in England, were placed on a line about twenty feet apart, while, in the centre, a low railing of about six feet in length divided in the distance. A poor old wretch, with a rope about his neck, was then tied to each frame, and made to squat down upon his hands and knees, to represent a watchdog; and some green almonds were scattered about him for his food.

These miserable individuals, whose hired and voluntary degradation made me heart-sick, were both of them old men, whose beards were grey, and whose age should have exempted them from such an office as their necessities had induced them to fulfill. Beside these were placed two youths dressed as Chinese, with long braids hanging down their backs, and feather fans in their hands; not very unlike the figures which adorn the old china in the cabinet of an antiquary. Next came forward a procession composed of all the trades of Constantinople, from the Jew who vends fried fish at the corners of the streets, to the Frank merchant, who, when he closes his office, becomes one of

the "Exclusives" of Pera.

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Of course, the Frank was very roughly handled. His hat was struck off, and made a football for all the regamuffins by whom he was surrounded; and the comments which were uttered alike upon his costume and his country were by no means courteous or conciliatory. But it could scarcely be expected that more delicacy would be observed towards a Frank than had been shown to the women of the country; and, this specimen of bad taste apart, the procession was the best point of the performance; as the individuals who composed it appeared to have been principally "taken in the fact" and forced upon the scene; thus affording faithful rather than flattering representations of their several callings.

When the procession moved off, the serious business of the drama was resumed; the three females reentered on the scene, accompanied by their mother, and a Greek serving-man, laden with their parasols and essence-bottles; and followed by two thieves, who concealed themselves behind the Chinese statues, for such I found that the two quaint figures who had so quietly walked to their places were intended to represent. After a vast deal of absurd grimace and buffoonery, rugs were spread in front of the low railing, and the four females and the Greek servant seated themselves, to listen to a tale told by the old woman.

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While they were thus engaged, the melancholy Jacques of the previous act stole upon their privacy, when an absurd exhibition of screaming and fainting took place; during which the two thieves contrived, without any attempt at self-concealment, to possess themselves of the cachemires and handkerchiefs of the ladies, and moving a few paces apart, they began to divide the spoil; when the bufoon, in his turn, prowling about the neighbourhood, discovered the theft, and raising a hue and cry, at which the dogs were let loose by the party, hastened during the confusion to seize upon the booty of the robbers. The outcry attracted the attention of the Cadi, who entered, accompanied by his attendants, to ascertain the cause of the tumult; when the ladies, with tears and shrieks, declared the amount of their losses, and demanded justice.

Of course the good taste which had made a jest of the feelings of their allies, and the morals of their women, would not permit the Turkish comedians to spare their judges; and accordingly the Cadi was a huge caricature of humanity, with

spectacles as large as saucers, and a beard of sheep-skin. A hurried trial ensued, in which while the Cadi was ogling the females, the buffoon was making himself merry at the expense of the Cadi; the executioner with his bastinado, and the clerk with his inkhorn and parchment, were both forthcoming; and the drama ended by the capture of the thieves, and the restoration of the stolen property!

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A confused dance, accompanied by the wild, shrill chanting of the dancers, which I can compare to nothing but the orgies of a troop of Bacchantes, succeeded the departure of the actors, and the whole arena appeared in motion