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Abstract

Carnival Celebrations in the Late Ottoman Istanbul: Intersections of Class, Gender and Identity in *Apokries* and *Baklahorani*

Carnival festivities in late 19th and early 20th century Istanbul were important opportunities for public revelry and reversal of everyday life especially in the Christian and European neighborhoods. These pre-Lenten festivities, taking place annually at the end of February or beginning of March for three weeks, were often referred interchangeably as *Apokries* in Greek, *Apukurya* in Turkish. The Clean Monday fair also the last day of the carnival, known as *Baklahorani*, exclusively taking place in the former working and middle-class *Rum* neighborhood Tatavla, today's Kurtuluş, was the climax of the all period. The general belief is that these festivities continued with an increased interest by the general public until a state ban in 1941.

Studies on public celebrations in the Ottoman Empire has predominantly focused on those with imperial character. Carnival, as a marginalized tradition with transnational elements, has not been studied in its own right. Besides, it has been erased from the collective memory and just recently came to the attention of the public due to the revival efforts in the last two decades, which has resulted in creation of a nostalgic and romantic history of the carnivalesque in Istanbul. I argue that the carnival festivities were not peaceful and cosmopolitan entertainments in Istanbul, but rather emblematic of cultural, ethnic and socio-economic issues and tensions in the society.

Drawing on memoirs and newspapers published in Istanbul in Turkish, English and French, as well as official documents from the Ottoman State archives, this paper explores transgressive behavior in carnival festivities in the late Ottoman period to look at the intersections of class, gender and ethnic identity in Istanbul. The first part focuses on the women's participation in the festivities, especially their public visibility through dancing, singing and drinking alongside males. Due to the anonymity provided by masks and costumes, this was viewed as a source of ambiguity which intensified the already blurred lines between unattended women, prostitutes and ordinary women. Secondly, I will explore particular cases of Muslim males who were caught in women's clothes in the festivities based on the police reports. The police documents reveal the material and cultural networks through which Muslim men from prominent families in the city could enjoy the festivities. Lastly, I will try to contextualize the grotesque plays which ridicule certain occupational groups associated with specific ethno-religious and social identities. These plays reflect the ordinary people's reaction to labor migration, poverty, security and display of masculinity.

As a result, this paper aims to provide insight into the intersections of class, gender and ethno-religious identities in late Ottoman Istanbul through carnivalesque occurrences at *Apokries* and *Baklahorani* festivities. By problematizing the nostalgic reminiscences, it attempts to provide an insight into the complexities and ambiguities in the society by giving agency to ordinary Ottomans in manifesting their identities, concerns and anxieties. Lastly, it aims to contribute to

social and cultural history of *Rum* community in Istanbul by exploring historical *Apokries* and *Baklahorani* festivities which are today erased from the collective memory.

Bio

Naz Vardar obtained her BA and MA degrees from the History Department at Bogazici University, Istanbul, Turkey. She is currently a second year PhD student at Simon Fraser University and working towards her comprehensive exams and learning Modern Greek. Her proposed research project is the social history of carnival festivities with a transnational perspective focusing on the Ottoman Empire, Modern Greece and the Middle East in the late 19th and early 20th century. She is also undertaking a side project on the sound recordings of prisoners of war in Germany in the World War I.