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Reyhanî: An Authentic Combination of Music and Dance in Mardin*


Reyhanî: Mardin’de Müziğin ve Dansın Otantik Bileşimi

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Abstract

Reyhanî is one of the cultural values that has been kept alive for thousands of years in Mardin, Turkey. As a form of a dance and a piece of music, it has a ritualistic origin, a traditional folklore of the region that is adapted to current conditions and reinterpreted. The dance can be practiced by men and women and it is expressive of the demonstration of gratitude to God, following the harvest time, of praying for goodness and beauty, and of the oath of loyalty to the beloved. Reyhanî, which is said to get its name from basil plant, is associated with the soothing smell of it, relaxing the audience. That the word reyhan is related to the word *ruh* (soul), *being seen* in the narrative of Jesus Christ’s crucifixion and that it is mentioned in the description of heaven in the Holy Quran result in the attribution of holiness to reyhan plant and of theological meaning to the danse and music.

In this study, reyhanî, performed as a dance and music in Mardin city center, has been handled with its traditional aspects and current nature, through contemporary approaches such as bodylore and body music. Information on the subject has

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been compiled, analyzed and thereafter conceptualized thorough observation and interview methods in Mardin province. The probable contributions of Reyhanî dance and music to the publicity of Mardin were emphasized and suggestions were made for these contributions.

Keywords: *Reyhanî, Mardin, bodylore, body music*

Öz

Mardin’de bin yıllardır süregelen kültürel aktarımın bugüne taşıdığı değerlerden biri de reyhanîdir. Ritüel kökenli bir dans ve müzik olarak reyhanî, Mardin tarihinden bugüne kalan; güncel şartlara adapte olabilmüş ve yeniden yorumlanmış geleneksel bir folklor verisidir. Reyhanî hem bir halk dansının hem de müziğinin ismidir. Dans, kadınlar ve erkekler tarafından icra edilebilir ve hasat sonrası Tanrı’ya şükretmenin, iyilik ve güzellik için dua etmenin, sevdiğine bağlılık yemini etmenin gösterisi şeklinde tasarlanır. Reyhan bitkisine nispetle bu isimle anıldığı rivayet edilen reyhanî, aynı zamanda müziğinin dokusu ile dinleyenlere ve izleyenlere rahvet vermesi bakımından da reyhan bitkisinin rahatlatıcı kokusu ile ilişkilendirilir. *Ruh* kelimesi ile bağlantısı, Hz. İsa’nın çarımha gerilmesi anlatısında yer alması ve Kuran’ı Kerim’de cennet tasvirinde zikredilmesi, reyhan bitkisine kutsiyet atfedilmesini ve dolayısı ile dansa ve müziğe teolojik anlamlar yüklenmesini doğurur.

Bu çalışmada bir dans ve müzik olarak Mardin şehir merkezinde icra edilen reyhanî, geleneksel yönleri ve güncel durumu ile ele alınmış; beden folkloru ve beden müziği gibi çağdaş yaklaşımlar bağlamında irdelenmiş; reyhanî dansındaki hareketlerin, kişinin aşkın duygusunu ifade etmesine olanak sağlayan bir araç olduğu; beden hareketleri ile evrendeki hareketliliğin taklit edildiği; bu yolla kişinin kendisini doğanın ontik bir parçası olarak gördüğü tespit edilmiştir. Konuya ilişkin bilgiler, Mardin ilinde gözlem ve görüşme metotları ile derlenmiş, analiz edilmiş ve gerekli kavramsallaştırmalara ulaştırılmıştır. Reyhanî dansı ve müziğinin Mardin’in tanıtımına sağlayabileceği katkılar üzerinde durulmuş ve söz konusu katkılara yönelik öneriler sunulmuştur. Öneriler doğrultusunda yapılacak çalışmalar, reyhanî dansı ve müziği aracılığı ile Mardin’e önemli oranda katma değer kazandırabilir; böylelikle Mardin ve Türkiye adına hem geleneksel bir değer korunur hem de benzer icralara yönelik uygulamaların artırılması ile sürdürülebilir bir kültürel kalkınma gerçekleştirilebilir.

Anahtar sözcükler: *Reyhanî, Mardin, beden folkloru, beden müziği*

Introduction

As one of the first settlements in history, Mardin is an ancient city dominated by many civilizations. Located on the trade routes of Upper Mesopotamia, Mardin has a rich and diverse folklore potential with the cultural data accumulated from civilizations such as Sumerians, Akkadians, Hittites, Assyrians, Urartians, Aramis and Artukids. As part of Mardin’s folklore, music and dance have been shaped with the common contributions of different ethnic groups for thousands of years. One of the common products of this multicultural and traditional mixture and accumulation is reyhanî which has been performed in Mardin for many years both as a dance and as a piece of melody.

The dance, and the music of reyhanî, means pertaining or belonging to reyhan, the basil plant. The name of the dance is derived from the plant. The word Reyhan comes from the root of the Arabic reyh rayiha relief (İşler-Ozay 2008, 391) and rwh / rwh / rūḥ (beautiful) fragrance, perfume. It is ocimum basilicum in Latin and ryhā ריחא in Aramaic, meaning spirit. Though Mardin is just one of the places where basil plant grows; the plant has gone beyond a plant by shaping the traditional texture of the city, becoming, thus, a cultural image or symbol for it. Apart from influencing the aesthetic art products, basil has become a source of inspiration for the folklore of the city.

Method and data collection process

Since reyhanî is the present day manifestation of an historical performance, a field research has been conducted in order to reach objective data on the subject. The research was carried out on the basis of the views of Çobanoğlu (2002, 63), within the scope of research techniques of folklore. Information about the research was obtained through observation, interview and literature review. The performance of reyhanî was dealt with as a cultural phenomenon observed in Mardin for a long time (6 years), and interviews were made with Mehmet Fidan, the founder of reyhanî music group, who was the first-degree source of the subject, and the performer of the dance and music of Reyhanî. The Reyhanî group, which consists of local voluntary artists working in different professions, displays performances with traditional melodies specific to Mardin culture in Arabic, Turkish, Kurdish, Syriac languages and exhibits them in specific sessions for local and foreign tourists visiting Mardin. In addition, information was obtained from another source person from Mardin who learned the tradition in its natural environment and knew its performance¹. Since Reyhanî was performed by women and men, the second source was chosen from among women with the idea that she could contribute on the subject from different perspectives. The information gathered from one male and one female performer was analyzed together with the observations about the region and outputs were obtained. In the study, the name reyhanî is used for both music and dance and for the group mentioned; it can be understood from the context which one it refers to.

1. Views on the origin of Reyhanî

Reyhanî dance and the melody are today claimed and performed by Arab, Syriac, Kurdish and Turkish groups in Mardin. In this respect, reyhanî is one of the prominent characteristics of Mardin's common heritage and multiculturalism. Although there is no definite information about the emergence of reyhanî dance, it is thought that it symbolizes the revival of nature in the spring season when the scent of the basil plant begins to be smelled (SP-1; SP- 2). In addition, there are various legendary stories about the historical roots of the dance that are narrated in Mardin. According to one of these legends, Reyhanî emerged from the dance and prayer of a priest who was drunk with wine. According to another narrative, during a musical entertainment in a palace, a snake came to the presence of the sovereign, left some seeds from his mouth and drew away without any harm. Then, the basil plant flourished from the seeds left by the serpent, and people dominantly got the idea that the serpent left without harm to anyone due the soothing effect of the music playing at the time. The melody played during the presence of the snake is thereafter called

reyhanî (SP-1; Uygur 2013, 6). Today, as a continuation of this belief, the dance is believed to comfort those who watch and perform it just like the soothing scent of the basil plant.

It is thought that the Reyhanî dance was originally a ritual. This is because most of the views about the origin of dance is to the effect that the ritual is a metaphor/simulation for a phenomenon in the universe (Köprülü 1999, 72-102). This metaphor is regarded as more of a mystical repetition, an identification for the re-demonstration of a phenomenon, and an activity that allows worshipers to assume a sacred quality. In traditional rural life, it is known that in the big seasonal ceremonies, metaphorical performances are made to represent events such as the solstice, the movement of the constellations, the growth, maturation of the agricultural products, the birth, survival and death of animals and humans (And 2003, 30). When the dance and the music are evaluated together in the context of analogy, it can be stated that reyhanî is the awakening of nature, embodied in the language of art. Performing Reyhanî with hands in the air, parallel to the ground, and keeping the palms open and pointing up and kneeling on the ground make us think that it has a theological nature and that it symbolizes the gratitude and thankfulness of people towards God for the fruitfulness of the crops.

Reyhan, as a plant mentioned in the sacred texts, is in the description of the beauty of heaven and it is associated with Jesus Christ. In the Glorious Qur'an, in the portrayal of paradise in the surah of Rahman, which reads: *Vel habbu zul asfi ver reyhân (reyhânu)* (Rahman-12) “, there are leafy grains and fragrant plants.” Since in Christianity the word reyhan is derived from the word soul, it is identified with Jesus Christ. It is thought that the basil plant flourished on the cross on which Jesus delivered his soul, and that the basil symbolizes the rebirth. According to this belief, a woman who kissed the said cross survived her illnesses and a deceased person that was laid on it was resurrected. On September 14, the date of the glorification of the holy cross which is celebrated every year by the Orthodox christians, the basil is used in the preparation of holy water and in the decoration of the cross. The use of the basil in the Holy Quran is expressive of a kind reminding Virgin Mary and Jesus Christ. This is because, prior to the verse with basil in Rahman surah, is the line which reads: “There are palm trees with fruits and buds.” (Rahman-11) where the palm trees are suggestive of the palm tree to which Virgin Mary was heading before giving birth to Jesus (quran-and-christianity-faith-reyhan.html). It can be stated that these beliefs have an effect on the naming of Reyhanî dance and music.

2. Performances and figures of Reyhanî dance

The body is the outer shell of an individual's identity, constituting the visible part of his or her existence. A person has the ability to materialize the abstract through body movements. Body movements appear to be the primary or the oldest means for a human being to express himself to the external world. Verbal expression comes thereafter and yet it supersedes it. In rituals, body movements along with poetry are considered to contribute to the semantic integrity of expression. Body movements that turn into art products during the course of time with emphasis on aesthetic structure becomes dance with rhythm, music and repetitions. Although distanced from carrying the quality of ritual, a dance in the modern society may still contain sub-text messages with their original spiritual content.

The reyhanî dance includes spiritual messages like praying to the divine, having nobility and seriousness with mimics, swearing an oath of allegiance to the beloved one with hand /

finger figures (SP-1). The performance starts with palms facing up; the arms open sideways, reflective of begging God. This figure, called the fan, apart from manly grandeur, symbolizes the scent of the basil plant spread by the wind. Also, the rotation of a performer around his own and an opposite performer symbolizes the rotation of the world (SP-1). In the next part of the performance, players slowly bend to the ground. The bending figure describes the gratitude to God's blessings after the harvest. Then from a crouched position, with the hands turned up and the arms open sideways, the performer stands slowly up in harmony with the rhythm of the music, at an angle of 180 degrees to the ground with oscillating movements. The movements are performed simultaneously if two people are dancing reciprocally. One of the dance-specific movements is flick. It is made by joining hands over the head and rubbing fingers together to make a sound. This figure, especially in terms of the sound, means the cry of joy and the expression of enthusiasm. However, the flick is also interpreted as the sign of man's oath of allegiance, respect and trust to the woman. During the game, especially male dancers hit their feet three times on the ground, which is accepted as a movement that they make in order to strengthen their oath (SP-1) and the female dancers do not hit their feet on the ground.

It can also be thought that the flick figure is the continuation of a historical practice that transforms the belief of the Sky God in Central Asian culture into the vow of faithfulness before Allah. In this respect, an old belief seems to be replaced by a confession of love or by vow of loyalty in love. The fact that the dance is displayed in ceremonies organized before the unification of the lives of men and women, such as promise-engagement-henna-weddings, is indicative of its aforementioned function.

Reyhanî is mainly a dance for the male and it is performed with one or two people. In music sessions, weddings and special shows, it is performed by the best dancer and others just watch him do it. Sometimes if there are more people who know how to play well, then two people dance and perform the figures and movements, jointly and synchronously. If the wedding or musical sessions are held in the family and if there are no alien males, the dance can be performed by a man and a woman. However, the woman does not make the floor figures, she only accompanies the man. The female plays rhythmically around the man while the male performs the floor figures. (SP-1; SP-2). The fact that women generally dance only among the family communities, and that they do not perform more masculine movements such as flicking, squatting on the ground and hitting the feet, can be considered as the reflection of gender perception and social division of labor on the performance of the dance.

3. Time and space in Reyhanî dance

The tune having the same name with Reyhanî dance has no special lyrics and the dance has no specific set of rules to obey to. It is freely performed. However, gestures and movements, and the tune offer an exclusive pleasure to the audience. Composed in Hüseynî maqam (mode) the heavy tune is in four parts. Its melody is performed by musical instruments such as violin, lute, cümbüş (a kind of mandoline with metal body), kemane (a kind of violin with a smaller body), goblet drum, zither and speed up tambourine. Since the mentioned musical instruments were not used outside the city center of Mardin in the past, the dance was performed only in the center of Mardin (SP-1). Although various ethnic groups (Kurdish-Arab-Assyrian-Turkish) wanted to compose lyrics for the melody this has not yet been achieved. The notes of the music are as follows²:



Although Reyhanî is performed mostly in transitional ceremonies or in rites of passage traditionally, it has started to take place in all kinds of musical entertainment over time. It is known that reyhanî dance occupies an important place in “Leyli Nights” which is one of the musical entertainments peculiar to Mardin. In addition, the dance is performed in the farewell ceremonies for the youth before they leave for their military service. In its modern applications, it is performed in historical places of Mardin specifically for tourists in order to introduce Mardin’s culture, as a folklore data that publicize the city.

Reyhanî is played for a minimum of 4 and a maximum of 11 minutes and this period is determined by the environment, depending on the feeling of sympathy between the audience and the dancer(s) rather than the purpose of the dance and the place where it is performed.

There is no specific outfit for the game. In this respect, the players' outfit is determined by the purpose of the dance. In modern practice, it is observed that the traditional folklore has become popular again, since it is practiced in the form of a mutual play between men and women at the beginning of the marriage ceremonies. Thus, it can be stated that the clothes of the dance are modern clothes depending on the occasion and the places in question. In addition, the frequent display of Reyhanî in television series has increased the national and international awareness and people from outside the region have started to show interest in this dance.

4. Reyhanî in the context of bodylore and body music

Contemporary approaches such as bodylore, which envisages the body as a text and proposes the examination of the data it points at, indicate that the body is a cultural work that we create rather than an organic structure. Culture is coded into the body, and body movements indicate which culture an individual belongs to. However, the body is also the producer of the phenomenon described as culture (Younis 1993, vii). Contrary to these definitions, in studies of dance anthropology, the ontology of the human is associated with the concepts of movement / performance / dance, and the dance is rather defined as a phenomenon that precedes cultures, being an organic creation that results from instinctual impulses (Huizinga 1980, 1-4). Regardless of whether it was later produced as a cultural product or organically inherent in the nature of being, dance can be regarded as a tool to establish communication between an individual and the outside world, to manifest his presence in the social order and to express himself.

Enabling the individual to express himself through body movements, it can be argued that dance is the first communication tool in the history of humanity with that aspect. As a matter of fact, the communication tools developed and evolved in line with human needs and the figures seen in the cave paintings containing movement can be seen as an exemplification of the fact that body movement has been a means of communication since the beginning of human history. Initially being part of a ritual of praying to the sacred power or powers, with feelings of respect and fear, dance has changed its identity of worship and gradually gained a social dimension, assuming the function of communication in social life. With this quality, it can be accepted that dance has an important effect in folk psychotherapy. As a means of communication, dance can mediate the messages that an individual wants to give to another individual or to the society, apart from being a means of fun / amusement / entertainment (Bascom, 2010: 71).

In another contemporary approach, Body music as well draws attention to the announcement of an individual's reactions to social and cultural events in the form of a musical behavior through the body. Body music is associated with human perception of rhythmic cycles in the universe as a field of study that covers all sounds produced by a person's body such as speech, finger snapping, applauding, jumping, and the body is defined as the sole common instrument of humanity in the historical process (Bulut 2011, 6-10, 69). Within this framework, it can be stated that the sounds of flicking and hitting the ground in the Reyhanî dance are a means of expressing one's feelings of love within the context of body music.

Since prehistoric times, dance is thought to have a function of synchronizing and

harmonizing the soul and body. In this respect, dance is an output that results from the interaction of different cultures and ensures the continuity of what is defined as culture; an expression of the feelings of anger, passion, joy, anxiety, happiness as a result of the sensitive interaction of the body and the soul. Dance enables the individual to express himself through his body and contributes to increasing his / her competence in social life; it gives him self-confidence and improves his sociability (Hançer 1979, 18; Ekmekçioğlu et al. 2001, 16; Terca 2016, 7). Academic studies have shown that dance is a remedy for an individual's feelings of loneliness and thus for his psychological well-being. Studies carried on particularly on elderly people have shown that dance increases memory performance, self-esteem and quality of life; cognitive, physical and mental health and contributes to postpone the emergence of age-related diseases (Uzakgören 2015, 60-62). In this context, KK, 1 whose knowledge was consulted, stated the social and individual benefits of Reyhanî dance as follows:

“Reyhanî assumes the function of a physical, mental and spiritual therapy for people. The person who takes part in Reyhanî can perform these three processes mentally, physically and spiritually. Physically, he presents the body aesthetics to the audience, with the gestures and movements of his arms, feet and other parts of his body. Reyhanî, as a means of presentation with body, expresses the signs of joy, happiness, sorrow, enthusiasm, loud cry and nobility.”

All of these can be considered as a positive contribution of dance in general and in particular, of reyhanî for the psychological and physical well being of the dancer as a means of self expression.

Conclusion and suggestions

Reyhanî which has been transferred to modern times with its long historical background is a common folkloric heritage of the multicultural structure of Mardin. Information about the origin of Reyhanî is related to the sanctity of the society. The holiness attributed to the basil plant in Christianity and Islam is transferred to reyhanî dance and the tune. The use of it in Qur'an in the description of the beauties of heaven, its power enabling the resurrection of the dead in the narrative of Jesus Christ's crucifixion, the allusion it makes for the concept of spirit associated with Jesus Christ can be interpreted as valid reasons for that transference. In addition to the expressions in the sacred texts, the soothing and peaceful synergy created by the dance and its music (as in end blown flute) is thought to be effective in imposition of a spiritual meaning on reyhanî dance.

Although performed rather with the aim of introducing the culture of Mardin at present, reyhanî continues to be a show of giving thanks to God, praying for goodness and beauty and a show of pledging allegiance to one's beloved. In the context of bodylore and body music, the dance, through fan, flick, the bend figure and other movements of the body, provides the needs of the individual such as self expression, integration with the society and having pleasurable time. All of these have been effective in preserving the functionality of dance to the present day and thanks to them the dance will still be alive in the future.

The aesthetic values that society can transfer from past to present through natural selection should be considered as unique, diverse and authentic traditional forms of expression for the

society of today and tomorrow and the contribution of cultural heritage to social development should be recognized. In this respect, being a collective expression of folk art, reyhanî, can be regarded as a common heritage not only of Mardin but also of mankind. However, it is thought that the most significant contribution for the national and international recognition of reyhanî can be made by raising the awareness of local people.

Suggestions

1) Reyhanî is a layered and deep cultural data as it is not only the name of a dance but also of a melody. Within this framework, it can be stated that reyhanî has a potential that can contribute to the publicization of Mardin with its dance and music. Studies to utilize this potential should be supported and increased.

2) With its traditional and historical roots, reyhanî should be kept alive zestfully by the Mardin people in daily life within the scope of national culture and it should be transferred to new generations.

3) Apart from individual efforts, courses can be started through institutional approaches in schools or public education centers to teach the young generations even at primary level for the recognition and the practice of the dance by a wider group of people.

4) Inspired by Mardin's traditional culture, an outfit peculiar to Reyhanî dance can be designed.

5) The music group established under the name Reyhanî can be turned into a foundation to expand its activities.

6) An emblem inspired by the basil plant can be designed for the dance, music and foundation to be established.

7) In this context, an application can be made to place reyhanî on the Unesco's Intangible Cultural Heritage List, and it can be publicized internationally through the works to be supported under the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of Diversity of Cultural Expressions.

The studies to be carried out in accordance with the suggestions can bring significant added value to Mardin through reyhanî dance and music. Thus, a traditional value would be protected for Mardin and Turkey and a sustainable cultural development can be realized by increasing the practices for similar other performances.

Endnotes

- 1 Interview records with the source persons on 21.04.2018 and 24.05.2018 are in our personal archives.
- 2 Compiled by Abdülkerim Çuha of Mardin region and taken from the archive of Tuna Tüfekçi, the notes of the reyhanî was reviewed by Lecturer Dr. Demet Aydınlı Gürler of the dept. of Music Ed., Cumhuriyet Univ.

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