

Storytelling Traditions in Turkey

Where Oral Literature Meets Performing Culture

'The horse's hoof is fast, the bard's tongue is quick'

Book of Dede Korkut

Agnieszka Ayşen Kaim

Journey from Europe to Asia











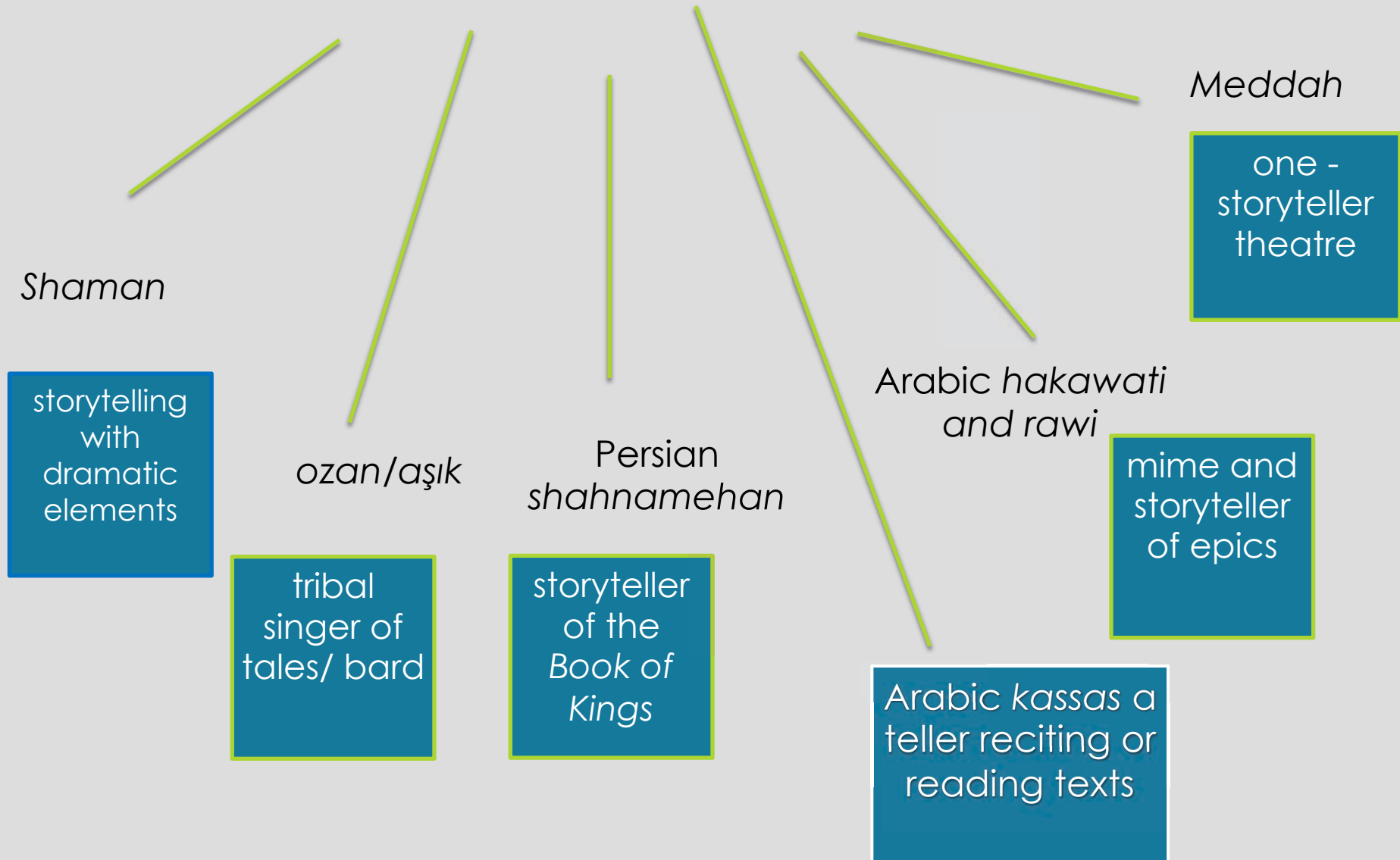
Ottomanalgia: orientalising the Orient according to European tastes



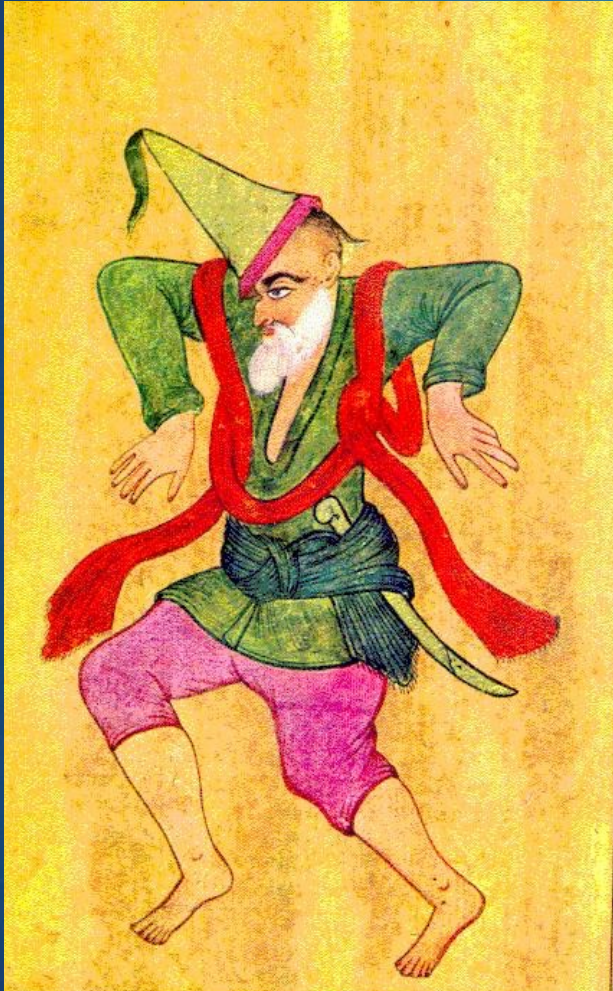
- ▶ Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres
- ▶ Turkish bath, [19.th](#)



Storytelling forms



Shaman as one of the ancestors of the Turkish storytelling forms



shaman - ozan – aşık - singer of tales
hâki (mime) - taklitçi (imitator)
meddah and dancer

Theatre of shaman multilevel acting transformation/ emboding

- own song, costume, props:
instrument – drum, stick
- stylised language, ventriloquism and
onomatopoeic phrases
- main constituents of the shaman
theatre - memorising, craft,
improvisation
- shaman as an artist hired for various
purposes
- theatrical space and conditions -
tent – yurt and horse culture



The term *oyun* in Turkish means ‘performance’, ‘play’, ‘theatre’, ‘game’ and ‘dance’ – but also ‘shaman’ in Old Turkish. the shamanistic performance itself – which consists of dance, vocal and instrumental music, dramatic and mimetic action, as well as ventriloquism and poetry reading – is also called *oyun* [And 1964: 11]



The epics of nomads as their survival power

Turkish ashik and Turkman bakshy

*Horse hooves are known for their speed,
just as minstrels are known for the gift of the
gab*

Dede Korkut Kitabı 11-15th century

- instrument
- audience as a resonator of performance
- dramaturgical function of music
- different styles of performing epic songs – singing and melodeclamation
- schools of poet singers



The Kirghiz Manas teller



Aşık – Turkish Singer of Tales



*In all epochs and times,
stage art and acting have
developed in tight
connection with dramatic
poetry that was its
complementation.*

J. Kotarbiński

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PXw3f9YTqV0>



Aşık and his audience



Aşık and self - promotion



The peasant
teller –
storyteller of
the Southern
Eastern
Anatolia

Semi-theatre terms from the nomadic storytelling dictionary:

- *qassa* (Tur. *kıssa*) – 'a tale' – 'to tell a tale', 'to wander', 'to follow';
 - Tur. *makam* (Ar. *maqâma*) – gathering, meeting, place;
 - telling a story at one meeting (Tur. *meclis*).
 - Ar. *hikaja*, Tur. *hikâye* (tale) means also telling the tradition;
 - Tur. term *yol* means 'way', 'route', 'journey' and 'entering the path of a story or epic song' (Pers. *destan*).

Troubadours of the East

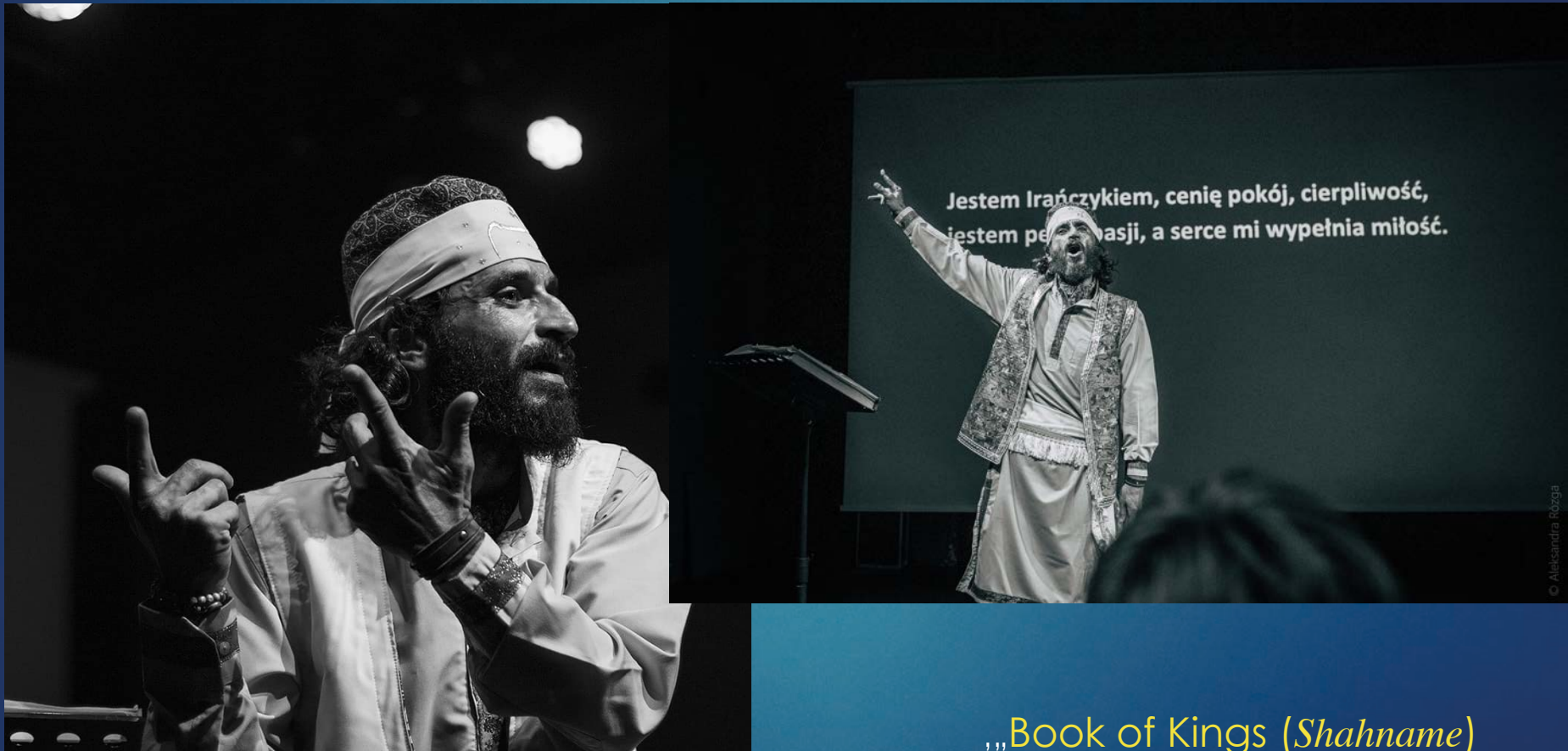
Persian tradition –*pardedari* *storyteller with screen illustration*



Performing Orality



Traditional Iranian shahnameh in Warsaw – Masud Akrami, 2019



„Book of Kings (*Shahname*)

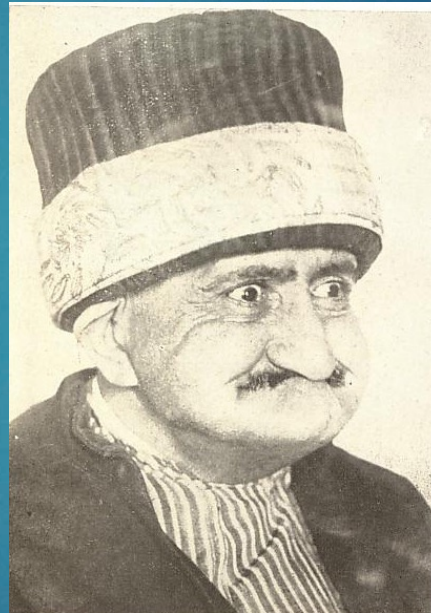
European Storytellers who work with the Eastern Storytelling Traditions



Shahname and
parde - illustration in
Warsaw National
Museum

Forms of Turkish Traditional Theatre

Orta oyunu – Eng. 'play in the middle' dell'arte

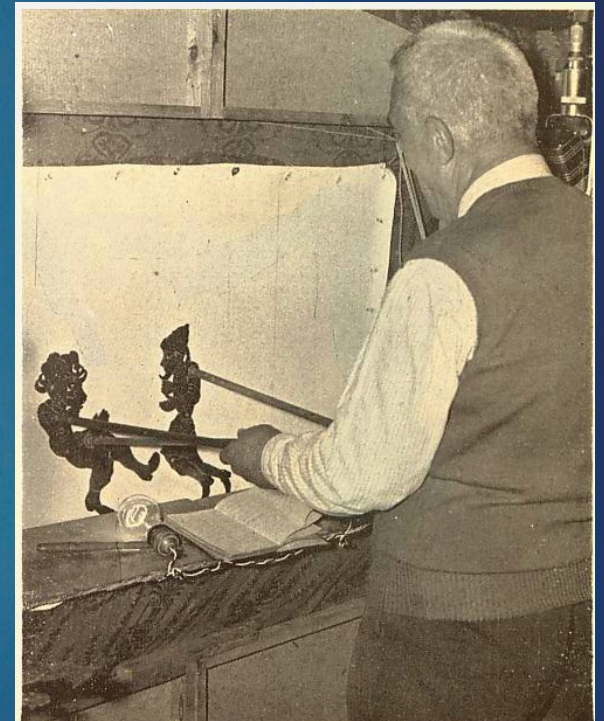
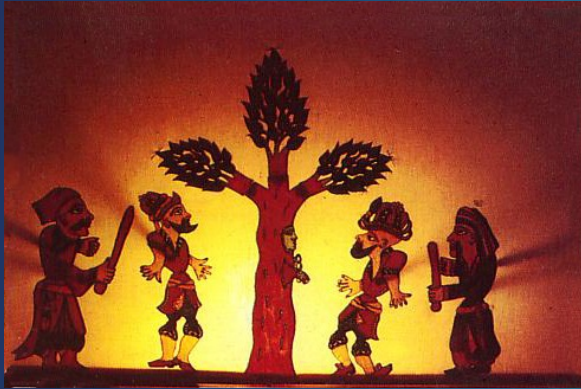


Stock characters



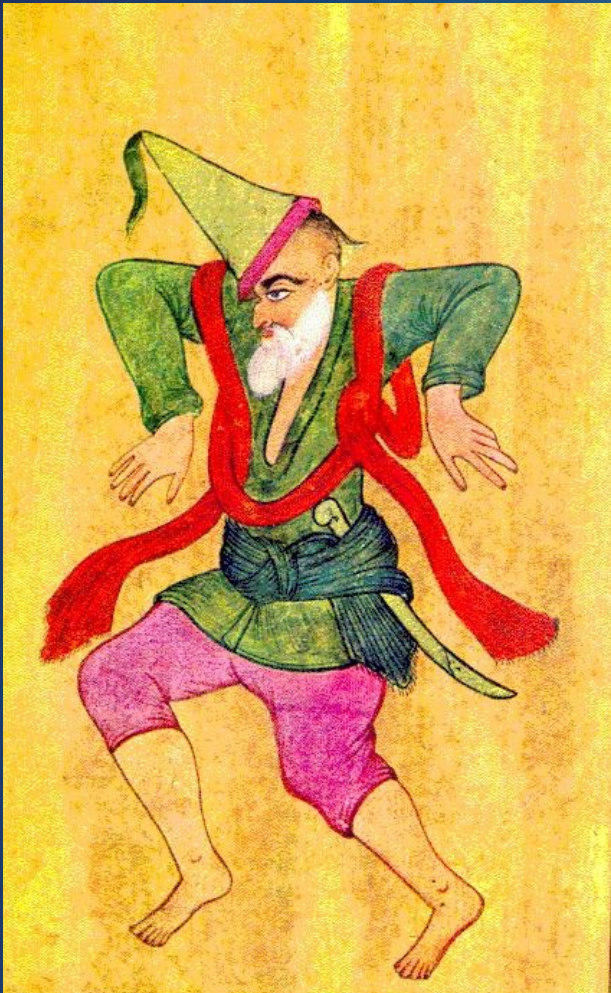
Karagöz

Turkish shadow theatre and his animator



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=olmSOcBmJ4c>

Storyteller *meddah*



Miniature, 18th century.
The first depiction of a
meddah with a stick and
scarf as a moving not static
figure.



Meddah Kız Ahmet,
19th century.

Meddah

Meddah – Turkish one actor theatre,
combining Turkish popular theatre
elements

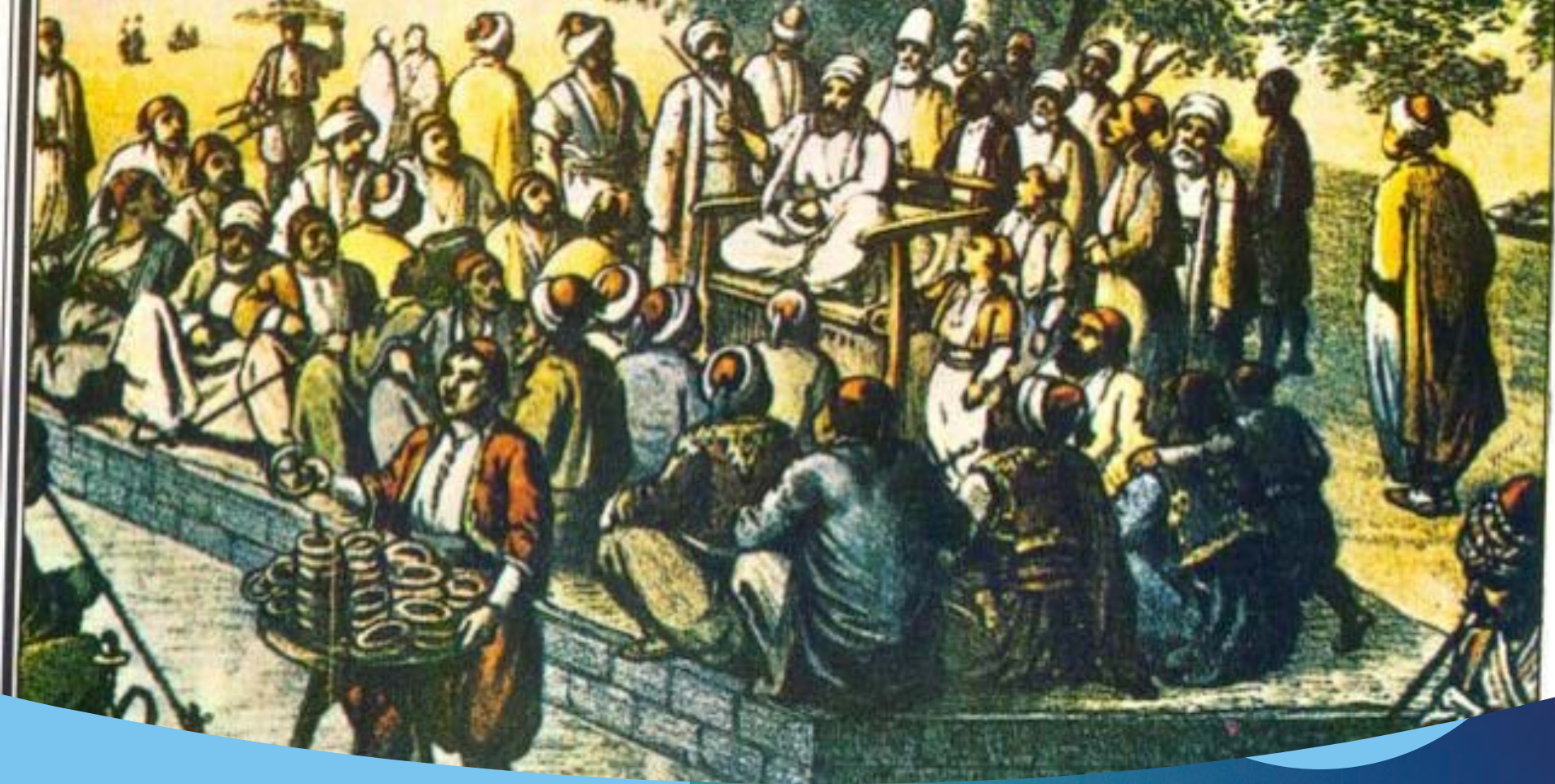
and epic narrative art :

- storyteller
- minstrel
- mimus – a mime artist
- parodist
- therapist

for the local community

wise man - teacher (muarrif)
explaining the tribal traditions





Meddah

IN OPEN SPACE IN OLD BURSA

Coffeeshouses – special places for performances of storytellers, bards and musicians



The audience

- primary
- secondary
- „bystanders” with selective attention

Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Traditions and the Verbal Arts: a Guide to Research Practices*,
Routledge, 1992.

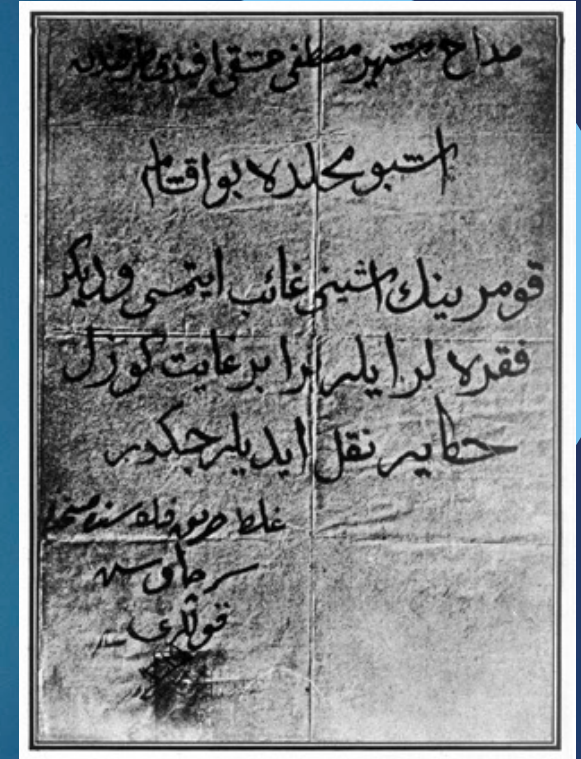
The famous meddahs in the past



Meddah Tahsin Efendi
19th c.



Meddah Aşkı Efendi
z początku 20th c.



Handwritten poster by
Aşkı Efendi

Meddah in Turkish traditional cafe



Characteristics of Turkic storytelling art

- anonymous
- imitation of content and form,
- simple script instead of a screenplay
- speech characteristics, formulae, riddles, tekerleme, stock of ready made material.
- flexible oral construction with few fixed points, interwoven by episodes
- improvisation
- wandering and moveable character of this art
- craft passed by master to his apprentice,
- symbolical space rooted in the utopian approach to places of temporary encampment
- sharp and direct sense of humour, quid pro quo.
- Interaction with spectators - digression - equal participants in the play, importance of social context

‘Poor theatre’

One actor theatre using taqlit as personification of objects and parodies of few drama characters

meddah – the essence of theatre and the germ of written drama text

‘poor theatre’ in means of using props

The simple multifunctional props: scarf, stick/ cane

as the duty of storytelling is not to imitate but to suggest



Script rather than the outline of 'what is going to be performed'

Session's fixed parts:

- prologue - preludium
- initiative formula
- recitation, tekerleme or short folk song koşma
- presentation of characters
- main scenario interwoven with episodes, muhavere – the oral battle between main characters
- epilogue
- closing formula
- kıssadan hisse (the lesson)

Prologue - Preludium initiative formula



Language of the traditional stage forms

Narration style – riddles and puns tekerleme, delimitation, mnemonic patterns, dialogue, indirect speech, reported speech, 'variations on the given subject', episodes, nonsense, comedy of errors, tricks, sensation of the day, pea pteroenta - winged words” .

Characteristics of literary genres used in storytelling

Persian naqqal or the Arabic rawi - rhyming prose;

the shahnamehan - poetry,

the meddah from the Ottoman period – prose, sometimes rhythmical
prose in the Ottoman Turkish language,

the last modern meddahs - prose close to spoken language

This colloquial speech strengthened their creative movement towards
theatre,

and enabled them to include more variation on the ‘fixed’ texts.

The transgression of storyteller to theatre actor....

- gestural speech
- acting imitation and parody
- jumping from from one character to another, from third- person narration to direct address
- improvisation
- props : cane and scarf
- use of space, circle of spectators

Storyteller as a commentator of current events



Ferhan Şensoy commenting on daily news

Ferhan Şensoy

Master of improvisation

Last meddah

Last actor of *orta oyunu*

Text writer and old style stand-up comedian



Münir Özkül and Ferhan Şensoy



Ferhangi Şeyler (Ferhan Like Issues) from 1987

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3KyWQNHHCSc>

The Alienation Effect Verfremdung Effect (Bertold Brecht)



Cem Yılmaz

- ▶ stand-up comedian
- ▶ brilliant showman
- ▶ Master of small talk
- ▶ geyik muhabbeti



Agnieszka Aysen Kaim

Traditional Theatre and the contemporary theatre's language :

- taqlit - acting imitation and modulation of voice instead of embodying the character
- giving the type to the characters (gestus – Brecht)
- concept of alienation effect
- multipurpose props but few in numbers
- improvisation
- theatre on the border of realistic and illusion theatre

Meddah – teatr ubogi
rekwizyty



THE SCARF AND FEW FEMALE TYPES BY
MASTER EROL



Erol Günaydın performing in Warsaw, 2006

Master and his humble translator into Polish
translation of storytelling act is like performance of two headed
storyteller

Multipurpose of props – symbolical imagination, towards the poor theatre



Meddah - master of *taqlit*

THE CHARACTERISTIC FEATURE OF THE MIDDLE EASTERN STORYTELLER IS THE ICONIC GESTURE CALLED TAQLIT (IN ARABIC, TAKLIT IN TUR.), WHICH MEANS 'IMITATION'. DRAMATIC NARRATION AND DRAMATIC CONFLICT (MOSTLY PROHIBITED BY ISLAMIC THOUGHT) HAVE SOMEHOW BEEN REPLACED BY A TECHNIQUE APPROVED BY ORTHODOX ISLAM.

IT HAS A FEW LAYERS, BOTH THE IMITATION OF ACTION IN THE ARISTOTELIAN SENSE OF THE WORD, MIMESIS, WHICH, IN ACTING, MEANS MIMICRY OR GESTURE, WHILE IN ITS NARRATION IT MEANS THE IMITATION OF CONTENT AND FORM.



Impersonisation of objects



Meddah – storyteller combining epic narration and elements of Turkish popular theatre:

- ONE ACTOR THEATRE,
- MINSTREL,
- ROMAN/ BYZANTHINE MIMUS,
- TRIBAL PARODIST,
- LOCAL THERAPIST AND TEACHER (MUARRIF)



Closing formulae

SAKIYA BU SOHBET KALMAZ IMIŞ BAKI

BAKI KALAN BU KUBBEDE BİR HOŞ SEDA IMIŞ

HER NE KADAR SÜRÇ LİSANI ETTİKSE AFFOLUN

IN THE CLOSING FORMULA THE STORYTELLER APOLOGIZES TO HIS AUDIENCE FOR ANY MISTAKES OF SPEECH HE HAS MADE OR ANY INACCURACY IN HIS NARRATION.