

Heavy Metal in a Muslim Context

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Towards the end of the 1980s the young caricaturist Abdülkadir Elçioğlu became one of the main protagonists of Heavy Metal in Turkish society. Elçioğlu, better known as “Aptülrika”—a pseudonym chosen in respect to the American band Metallica—is the father of the cartoon Grup Perişan. The Grup Perişan was published in Turkey’s leading satirical magazine *Hibir*, which had a weekly circulation of up to a 100,000 copies. At that time, the Turkish cartoon and comic culture was still unchallenged by private TV and radio programmes that eventually lead to its decline. *Hibir* was particularly popular among the younger generation, in part due to its low price and nation-wide availability, but probably more due to its (sexual) permissiveness and declared mission to criticize cultural values, politics, and the ordinary way of life.

Aptülrika’s cartoon tells the story of three young “losers” sharing the same flat in Istanbul during their student years (see Cartoon # 1). Each of them—Soyut, Dangal, and Mazhar—embody certain stereotypes of Turkish society. Soyut plays the role of the confused intellectual, and Dangal represents the naive and dumpy, but nevertheless, likeable guy from the Anatolian countryside. Above all stands Mazhar, the real hero of the cartoon who embodies all the features of a young, rebellious Rocker. Uncompromising in his individual way of life and always on a collision course with the surrounding society, he goes through, and get into, a lot of trouble. The author leaves no doubt as to who is supposed to be the reader’s favourite. He endows Mazhar with a cheerful, carefree character that enjoys life to the fullest degree. In this way he shows the ultimate success of a lifestyle determined by individual freedom and self-determination.

Making Mazhar the indisputable hero of the cartoon was not unintentional. Aptülrika is a rocker and Metal lover himself. In the particular period of the mid-1980s up to the early 1990s, when Metal was something completely new for Turkish society, he and his friends experienced many problems and conflicts quite similar to those depicted in the Grup Perişan. Although there is a clear exaggeration in the humorous situations and character portrayal, the Grup Perişan depicts day-to-day life with all the conflicts of a changing society.

The Grup Perişan’s visual imagery conveys the cultural code and meaning of a specific popular culture. Aptülrika filled the background of the cartoon—by way of posters or writings on the wall—with some “hidden” information about bands, up-coming concerts, and the latest record releases. Going beyond the scope of the cartoon, he began to use the blank margins of the magazine pages for some extra draw-

Since its emergence in the late 1960s, heavy metal has witnessed a worldwide spread, including to countries of the Middle East. Modern means of media and communication systems convey its specific cultural codes to a global audience. The “new” codes and symbols get appropriated and sometimes assume contradictory meanings in local contexts.

ings and verbal information. The written text includes Turkish translations of songs, band biographies, and the latest news. Band photographs were substituted by caricatures. Over the years, Aptülrika portrayed almost the whole Metal world. When the editor intervened to try to curb the Metal theme, he faced massive protests from

the readers and finally gave in to Aptülrika’s idea of transforming the cartoon into a unique sort of “Metal Magazine.”¹

How codes collide

Aptülrika’s cartoons are part of a global process of disseminating popular cultures through the means of modern media and communication systems. The global availability of cultural resources provides the individual with a variety of new identity options. Identifying with one of those global popular cultures involves the act of appropriating its specific codes. These consist of a set of symbols, sounds, and styles demarcating one popular culture from the other. These codes assume meaning in a local context where they meet and challenge the dominant codes of the surrounding society.

The Grup Perişan illustrates how the two codes collide in the everyday life of Turkish society. In Cartoon # 2 where Mazhar is surrounded and verbally insulted by several men, the illustrator uses different styles of beards to comment on different social/ideological groups. The style of beard gives a Turkish man the opportunity to express his political affiliation. Accordingly, the two men in the upper right corner of the picture can be identified as members of the far right-wing nationalist movement. The man in the lower left corner is clearly a representative of the Islamist faction. The other two protagonists, one with a huge moustache and a newspaper under his left arm, and a second in a police uniform, must be seen as representing the socialist left and the authoritarian state. The men react to Mazhar according to their various political-cultural orientations: “the policeman” observes him with a sceptical look, “the socialist” criticizes his non-political attitude, “the Islamist” denounces him as a heretic, and “the fascists” threaten to physically harm him.

Flaunting his appearance as a “Metalhead,” Mazhar exhibits a disregard of the dominant social and cultural codes. The most striking and in some ways rebellious feature of a male Metalhead is his long hair, since short hair is the norm among Turkish men. Long hair, interpreted from a traditional, conservative point of view, is coded as feminine and therefore contradictory to the Turkish ideal of manliness. The feature of long hair is associated with stereotypes such as homosexuality or simply religious disbelief. A second cultural-historical reference to long

Cartoon #1: The three main characters of Aptülrika’s comic strip Grup Perişan: Soyut, the confused intellectual, Dangal, the likable country bumpkin, and Mazhar, the rebellious, heroic Rocker



" DOMATES, BİBER, PATLICAN



Cartoon #2: The rocker Mazhar is surrounded and verbally insulted and physically abused by men with different political affiliations as represented by their style of beard.

hair is the Turkish socialist movements of the 1970s when long hair was, and continues to be, coded as an expression of political ideologies such as communism and anarchism. A third, more recent way of interpreting long hair is directly linked to the emergence of the Turkish Metal scene. Following the suicides of several teenagers and the "ritual" killing of a young woman in an Istanbul cemetery in 1999, long hair has been widely associated with Satanism.² During the public media hypes succeeding those events even Aptülka himself was accused of promoting Satanist ideas.

Aptülka further challenges social codes and norms in his cartoons by allowing his characters to act out in ways that are considered inappropriate by traditional society. In a cartoon (not shown) Mazhar and his girlfriend hold hands and kiss each other in a number of public places, thus violating the dominant codes of acceptable social behaviour. Their behaviour is met by vulgar verbal and physical insults by "respectable" men on the streets, exposing the hypocrisy of mainstream society and also addressing contrary notions about gender relations. The cartoon finally affirms the desire of young people for freedom from public censure. The couple eventually end up in a private room, alone, where they can act on their sexual desires in a manner that is self-empowering.

Appropriating anti-Christian symbols in a Muslim context

Aptülka's cartoons depict the Metal scene's cultural codes and include a heavy dose of Christian symbols. These symbols seem out of place in the context of a predominantly Muslim society, a fact that even most Turkish Metalheads agree on. From its early days in the late 1960s when Heavy Metal arose from the urban working class districts of England, it has challenged Christian tradition by appropriating anti-Christian symbols. The anti-Christian iconography represents a rebellious act of throwing off the moral chains Christianity imposes on a self-determined fulfilment of individual needs and dreams. In their rejection of Christianity many bands even began to refer to Nietzsche's philosophy. Common to the Metal scene's cultural code are symbolic representations of evil such as depictions of the devil, the inverted cross (which refers to the Roman Empire's execution of St. Peter by having him crucified with his head down as an act of mocking his religious belief), and 666, the number of the beast (which derives from St. John's book of revelation and symbolizes the approaching Apocalypse). To such symbols are added elements of pre-Christian pagan traditions such as the Pentagram, or Thor's Hammer. Also common are explicit sexual illustrations and various forms of human and animal skulls.

By being transferred from one context to the other the symbols undergo a shift of meaning. Why, if they lack their original defiant meanings, are anti-Christian symbols being appropriated in a Muslim context? The former vocalist of the Turkish band, Witchtrap, provides a quite simple explanation: "We worked hard on finding an anti-Muslim symbol, but we couldn't find anything. We tried something with the crescent, but it didn't look good!" An Israeli metal musician similarly notes that the symmetrical shape of the Star of David did not allow it to be distorted as a religious symbol, so Israeli Jewish Metalheads had to use instead the symbol of the inverted cross!

Another aspect that needs to be mentioned here is the appropriation of pagan symbols and concepts. Central to this phenomenon is the extreme, but marginal sub-genre of Black Metal, which has been

dominated by Scandinavian bands for years. One of Black Metal's main features is a bold rejection of Christianity by desecrating its symbols and referring to pre-Christian pagan codes. In a Scandinavian context this means the use of symbols and deities from Northern European mythology. The popularity of Scandinavian bands in Turkey results in a small number of bands simply adopting the image of so-called "Viking Metal." Some other bands transfer the concept of their Scandinavian idols to a Turkish context, and consequently refer to pre-Islamic, Shamanist mythologies.

Symbols can become highly politicized and lead to serious misunderstandings. In recent years the Pentagram, coded as a sign of evil, became known to a wider Turkish audience due to the increasing popularity of western horror movies and sporadic media coverage of Satanism. Interestingly, some observers had even misinterpreted it as the Star of David (the Hexagram). In parts of the Arab world, where Metal has also been associated with Satanism, a number of newspaper commentators depicted the Hexagram instead of the Pentagram, claiming a connection between the emergence of Satanic ideas and their Zionist arch enemy. In Morocco, on the other hand, the Pentagram functions as a national emblem that even decorates the country's flag. From a Moroccan Islamic perspective the five edges of the Pentagram are attributed to the five pillars of Islam.³ Meanwhile, the public media in Morocco falsely connects Heavy Metal with the Star of David.⁴

Secularization and self-empowerment

The participation of Turkish youths in Metal culture serve as a source of self-empowerment. The new codes enable the individual to symbolically resist social and moral constraints while appealing to the individual's social and emotional needs for group affiliation and self-expression. The Metal scene's appropriation of cultural codes can further be read as a demarcation from the dominant, particularly religious, codes of society. Through Metal, youths seem to be expressing their desire for a secular society and asserting their refusal to accept religious conservatism and Islamism. The Metal scene may also be contributing to an opening of society; the dominant social and cultural codes gradually adjust to new codes, some of which are dispersed through Metal culture, and, possibly, make way for changes of social and moral standards.

Notes

1. See Aptülka's website: www.aptulika.com.
2. For more information, see T. Deniz Erkmen, "Construction of Satanism in Turkish Secularist and Islamist Newspapers," ISIM Newsletter, no. 8 (September 2001): 16.
3. See Gerd Becker, "Das Pentagramm in Marokko: Religiöses Symbol - politisches Emblem - magisches Zeichen," in *Jahreshefte der Gesellschaft der Freunde Islamischer Kunst und Kultur*, Jahrgang 1993-1996 (München: Eothen, 1998), 7-13.
4. For example, "Mağraba ya'badüna aš-šayÖän," *aÖ-NaifDa*, no. 73 (July 2002): 1, 5-8.

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