

Daniel Koglin (Athens)

The Others That Are Us

Comparing Controversial Meanings of *Rebetiko* in Greece and Turkey

It is a reasonable scientific custom to begin a study with defining the central concepts that are to be discussed. This, however, is usually difficult for ethnomusicologists who examine the ways members of certain communities define their own identity musically. Rather than being a pre-existent quality which is simply recognized, an identity is created in an act of definition through which something or somebody is identified by others with certain attributes or labels. Thus, if ethnomusicologists attempt to study how communal identity is related to music, they ask who makes the respective definition, what the underlying motives are, how the act of definition is accomplished and what effects it has. They make sure, with good reason, to intervene as little as possible in this act and, instead, to let members speak – although selecting which members are allowed to express the identity of the whole community does already mean participating in its creation.

Digging up members' definitions is, of course, an intricate business, in particular when dealing with a subject so rich in ambiguities as the one I treat on these pages: The case of Greek *rebetiko* song will serve to exemplify the troubles analyzing indigenous conceptions of musical identity can involve. It will also reveal under which circumstances it can be rewarding to compare the ›emic‹ perspective, in the sense of a cross-cultural analysis, to external or ›etic‹ conceptions of the subject under discussion.

Though it remains obscure when and where certain songs had been given the name *rebetika* (plural of the adjective *rebetiko* whose etymology is still a knotty point) for the first time, it can safely be said that by the beginning of the 20th century the term had already come into use among the Greek population of cities within the Ottoman Empire.¹ From then on, this term has been applied to songs which differ widely in many respects. General consent has only been obtained to the thesis that they combined elements from Greek folk song, Byzantine ecclesiastical chant, musical traditions of the Orient, the Balkans and the West in a syncretistic manner, so that various people at one time or another believed – or pretended to believe – they heard *rebetiko*. Thus, »rebetiko isn't a limited entity of songs. We might say that each period also had its rebetiko, as people perceived and used this musical tradition in different ways«².

Some analysts concluded that, given the vexed question of a scientifically sound definition of a generic term *rebetiko*, it was better to abandon it and to talk about »Greek urban popular song« instead.³ I do not believe this to be a good solution: The concept of *rebetiko*

1 Aristomenis Kaliviotis, *Smyrna: The Musical Life 1900–1922*, Athens 2002, p. 130. For convenience, I have translated the titles of all books and articles published in Greece into English.

2 Nikos Kotaridis, »The historical research into rebetiko«, in: *Paradosi & Techni* 31 (1997), p. 21.

3 See for example Nearchos Georgiadis who avoids the term *rebetiko* throughout his book *Rebetiko and Politics*, Athens 1996, claiming that *rebetiko* composers preferred the label »popular song« (p. 11). In a

is a reality we cannot deny, no matter when, by whom and to what purpose this label has been applied to certain songs. I consider it a semantic construction which some individuals may share, but which also depends on their interaction with their environment (socially acquired attitudes, motives, interests, knowledge; access to public discourse, discography, live performances etc.) and, eventually, changes over time. Rather than being a generic term based on historical facts – which are but *facta ficta* as Nietzsche argued – the label *rebetiko* is a flexible instrument of identification. Based on my own recent fieldwork in Athens and Istanbul and on my experiences as a performer of *rebetiko* music, I am therefore concerned with the question: What do people mean by labelling a song as *rebetiko* and when do they apply this label?

What is ›Classic‹ *Rebetiko*?

Ever since its accession into Greek discography during the 1930s, *rebetiko* has given rise to much controversy in the press. The debaters did usually not define their concepts precisely. Quite the contrary, their remarks were often characterized by inconsistencies, allusions, ambiguities and a rather emotional diction. Furthermore, they regularly quoted alleged source materials like song lyrics or autobiographical narrations of *rebetiko* musicians to buttress their arguments; even though such texts are, in some respects, just as fictitious as poems or heroic tales. In this way, a mythical aura has been created about the genre. Pretending to write the history of *rebetiko*, the debaters introduced elements of oral mythology into the controversy. Consequently, *rebetiko* has to be seen in the context of a »post-literate orality«⁴ in that the discourse merges orally influenced practices and conceptions with scriptural ones (and, from the 1950s on, with the techniques of cinema and television) thus both reflecting and affecting the way local audiences perceive *rebetiko*.

After studying related press articles (c. 1930–2000) and interviewing *rebetiko* fans in Athens and Istanbul, I became aware of a broad consensus as to the genesis of *rebetiko*: A majority of commentators in both countries agreed it originated with the Greek speaking, Christian population of Asia Minor which in Turkey is referred to as the Rum. When most Rum fled to Hellas, after the Greek-Turkish War which ended in 1922, the songs they carried with them were said to have contributed to the development of a repertoire for which the title *smirneiko* or Asia Minor *rebetiko* was gradually established.

Rebetiko melodies do not share a few striking characteristics which make them immediately identifiable. Given their above-mentioned syncretism, whether a song is termed *rebetiko* depends on a perceived quality that emerges from a total of delicate nuances: »There are so many details that, if a musician does not grasp them, you hear *rebetiko* and try to

similar vein, Panos Savvopoulos asserts – in his article »On the Reading of the Word ›Rebetiko‹« (*Odos Panos* 131, 2006, p. 4–21) – that the label *rebetiko* »was coined by the record companies in the early twentieth century« and did not gain wider currency until the end of the 1940s (p. 18). See also Ilias Voliotis-Kapetanakis, »The Old and the New: Myth and Reality in the Work of Vasilis Tsitsanis«, in: *Vasilis Tsitsanis: An Ingenious Composer of Popular Music*, ed. by Anastasia-Valentini Riga, Athens 2003, p. 33–38, according to whom Greek urban popular song »erroneously has been termed *rebetiko*« (p. 33).

4 The term is Walter Ong's, cf. his *Orality and Technology: The Technologizing of the Word*, London 1982.

find out what kind of thing you are listening to. Because, let's say, *minore* [i. e. the minor key] exists in European music as well as in rebetiko; they are just a hair's breadth apart.⁵ It is, nevertheless, possible to extract from the indigenous debate some definite criteria of prototypal or >classic< *rebetiko*: Many debaters distinguish between >old< and >new< or popularized *rebetiko*, the borderline falling within the period of the German occupation (1941–1944) when the Greek record production came to a standstill. According to this view, the classic form of the genre was recorded before the Second World War.

Old *rebetiko* is said to comprise two supposedly distinct subtypes, the elder Asia Minor style (otherwise known as Smyrna style) and the subsequent Piraeus style: Asia Minor *rebetiko* was performed by singers of both sexes and by professional instrumentalists who played a variety of instruments such as violin, *santur*, *ud*, piano, violoncello, guitar, mandolin or *kanun*. These musicians were immigrants from urban centres in Western Anatolia like Smyrna (Izmir), Ayvalik or Bursa, many of whom had undergone formal musical training and could play Ottoman or European classical music as well as popular songs from diverse ethnic groups within the Ottoman Empire. *Rebetiko* in the Piraeus style, on the contrary, was sung by a male singer and accompanied on *bouzouki*, *baglamas* and guitar. These instruments were played by local amateurs, autodidactic musicians from an underprivileged social milieu. Their repertoire, technical abilities and theoretical knowledge – as regards, for example, musical notation or the Ottoman *makam* system – were much more limited than those of professional instrumentalists from Asia Minor.

Yet, a strict distinction between these two subtypes is difficult to maintain, if we consider that local musicians in pre-World War II Piraeus were in close contact with their Anatolian colleagues: They performed together in recording studios and on stage. There are several documented cases of musicians from Asia Minor who played *bouzouki*, while some local *rebetiko* composers were virtuoso players of instruments like *santur*, violin or *ud*. Anatolian musicians became the directors of Greek record companies, so they chose which Piraeus *rebetika* were to be recorded and wrote themselves songs in this style. And they even contributed to the development of a characteristic Piraeus sound by introducing the *bouzouki* into Greek discography and deciding Markos Vamvakaris to sing his songs himself with his raucous voice which soon was to become an acoustic trademark of Piraeus *rebetiko*.⁶ There was, in short, a coexistence and interaction of elder and younger musicians from different regional, social and musical settings. Granted that professional instrumentalists from Smyrna also discriminated between themselves and amateurs from Anatolian villages,⁷ it might be more precise to say that the distinction of two subtypes refers to a musician's status and performance style rather than to discrete repertoires or musical traditions. Not without reason did the singer Angela Papazoglu from Smyrna complain that

5 *Rebetiko* singer-songwriter Kostas Rukunas, in: Tasos Schorelis and Mimis Ikonomidis (eds.), *A Rebetis: Kostas Rukunas*, Athens 1974, p. 44.

6 See Kostas Hatzidulis, *History of Rebetiko*, vol. 1, Athens undated, p. 100–102; Markos Vamvakaris, *Autobiography*, ed. by Angeliki Vellou-Keil, Athens 1978, p. 150–159; Michalis Yenitsaris, *Autobiography*, ed. by Stathis Gauntlett, Athens 1992, p. 35–46; Tasos Schorelis, *Anthology of Rebetiko*, vols. 1–4, Athens 1988, *passim*.

7 Angela Papazoglu, *Our Fortunes Here*, Athens 2003, p. 104.

the local musicians, after she and her colleagues had settled in Piraeus in 1922, »took the songs from us, but because they played them with different instruments the songs sounded differently«⁸.

Still, it would be rash to drop the dichotomy Smyrna-Piraeus, as it is a useful analytical tool for understanding the dialectics of music and identity: Generally speaking, Greek audiences consider Piraeus *rebetiko* to represent the classic form of the genre; Turkish audiences, on the contrary, prefer to ascribe this title to songs in the Asia Minor style. I ground this claim not only on an analysis of relevant written sources in both countries, but also on the results of a survey which I conducted in Athens and Istanbul: 36 Athenians and 18 Istanbulians I interviewed between November 2004 and June 2005 had (in at least one crucial respect) considerably divergent notions of what a prototypical *rebetiko* song is. While listening to two Smyrna-type and two Piraeus-type recordings, they had to declare how typical they regarded each song of the genre *rebetiko* by rating it on a scale from 1 (very typical) to 7 (utterly atypical). The emerging tendency was quite clear: On the average, Greek listeners rated Piraeus songs as significantly more typical of *rebetiko* than Asia Minor songs, whereas Turkish listeners held the converse to be true.

This divergence between Greek and Turkish audiences springs, in my view, from their relating themselves in a different way to those people whom they identify with *rebetiko*: *Rebetiko* listeners and musicians I consulted during my fieldwork in Istanbul in March 2005, associated it first and foremost with the Rum of the Ottoman era, and their statements often smacked of nostalgia: One Turkish musician, whom I interviewed at his home in Üsküdar, said he liked *rebetiko* »because it reminds me of the good old times of Istanbul where Turks and Rum were living together sharing the values of the brilliant culture of the Ottoman Empire«⁹. *Rebetiko* – though being the music of the »other«, that is, the member of an ethnic and religious minority – is partly perceived as »ours« by Turkish listeners: The music, in particular that performed in the Asia Minor style, is easily comprehensible to them; and, in a complementary way, listening to *rebetiko* does actually mean »rediscovering my own past«, as a Turkish student of history at the Istanbul Boğaziçi University put it whose grandfather had been living in Thessalonica and could speak Greek and Ladino, the language of the city's formerly large Jewish community.¹⁰

The Greek *rebetiko* debate, on the other hand, is polarized between those who regard genuine *rebetiko* as an expression of marginal human beings (criminals, hashish smokers, sub proletarians), and others who refuse to accept this position.¹¹ I assume therefore that audiences in both Turkey and Greece tend to define *rebetiko* as the musical tradition of a minority, either ethnic or social, within their own society. Accordingly, it is the vernacular musical idiom – rather than the foreign one – which they label as classic.

8 Ibid., p. 375.

9 Interview, March 8, 2005.

10 Interview, March 8, 2005.

11 For a review of the debate on this controversial issue in Greece see: Stathis Gauntlett, *Rebetiko Song: A Contribution to Its Scientific Approach*, Athens 2001, p. 26–46. See also footnote 3.

The Music of an Intellectual Minority

Most contemporary performances of *rebetiko* deviate from the classic prototype if measured against the yardstick of pre-World War II 78 rpm recordings. Yet, it is frequently the very act of deviation which tells us how the prototype is conceived. Two albums produced in Istanbul may illustrate my point: The popular group Yeni Türkü's *Külhani şarkıları* (Göksoy 1994) and *Rebetiko from Istanbul* (Imaj 2001) by Kudsi Erguner and his ensemble of Turkish classical music. Both albums have to be seen in connection with a revival of Ottoman music in Turkey which set in during the 1980s. Both *ney* player Kudsi Erguner and *tanbur* player Murat Aydemir, who contributed to Yeni Türkü's album, are central figures in this revival. The combination of *ney* and *tanbur*, however, has always been regarded as the most characteristic one of Ottoman court music.¹² Hence it is, on closer inspection, not only innovative to perform a ›low-life‹ music on these ›learned‹, if not ›spiritual‹ instruments *par excellence*. It is also illuminating, with regard to the perception of *rebetiko* in Turkey, that this rapprochement of popular and highbrow music is limited to the Anatolian branch of *rebetiko*: All the songs featuring *ney* or *tanbur*, on both albums, were written by composers from Asia Minor.

Over a long period, Greek advocates of learned culture denied *rebetiko* had anything to do with art: They never tired of condemning it as »vulgar«, »criminal«, »Asiatic« or otherwise marginal in a derogatory sense.¹³ Today it is appreciated even by those who frown upon contemporary forms of popular music, like Turkish *arabesk* or Greek *skiladiko*, using the same pejorative epithets which were formerly meant for *rebetiko*. Yet, it would be exaggerated to claim *rebetiko* had won true popularity in Turkey, because the common run of people is rather indifferent to it. It is a part of the intellectual elite who embrace the music of the Greek-speaking Rum – along with that of other ethnic minorities like Jews, Kurds and Armenians. In this respect, *rebetiko* is today a double minority phenomenon.

In Greece things appear to be less different than one might expect: The *rebetiko* revival of the 1960s and 1970s was prepared by the efforts of Manos Hatzidakis, Mikis Theodorakis and other representatives of art music. They bore fruit mainly among the student population who rediscovered the last living musicians of Piraeus *rebetiko* and became their new disciples. Until today *rebetiko* is an important part of the everyday life of Greek students, especially of those who sympathize with Leftism. Likewise, two out of the three radio stations in Athens and Istanbul that broadcast regular programmes dedicated exclusively to *rebetiko*, are affiliated with the Left.

It seems that the imagined »desire for rebelliousness«¹⁴ of the pre-war *rebetis*, the member of a marginal group, strikes a responsive chord in ›Leftist‹ intellectuals of today. But at the same time they realize how wide the gap is that separates them from the former:

12 Cf. Bülent Aksoy, »The Contributions of Multi-Nationality to Classical Ottoman Music«, accessed on June 8, 2007, at http://www.lesartsturcs.org/music/classical_ottoman.html 25. 10. 2007.

13 This polemic is analyzed in Kostas Vlisidis's essay »Rebetiko in the 1930s and [General Ioannis] Metaxas, According to Contemporaneous Written Sources«, in: Kostas Vlisidis, *Aspects of Rebetiko*, Athens 2004, p. 11–65.

14 Stathis Damianakos, *Ethos and Culture of the Dangerous Classes in Greece*, Athens 2005, p. 123.

»I love rebetiko songs«, an English teacher at Istanbul's Boğaziçi University and amateur musician wrote to me, »because they remind me of a bitter history across the Aegean – starting on the Eastern shores, ending in the West. And I regret being a member of the suppressing and ruling majority on this side. A great culture has been swept off the surface of Anatolia and I believe it's a great loss for the whole mankind. And the songs perfectly reflect the bitterness of this tragic phenomenon, even when they seem to be joyful.«¹⁵

I myself consider this amalgamation of being familiar yet different, of past and present, of joy and sorrow to be a major cause for the favourable reception *rebetiko* is having in Greece and Turkey. Audiences in both countries see it as a part of their musical tradition; yet this does not stop them from redefining and developing it in creative ways. *Rebetiko* remains a minority phenomenon – in an age where discussing such phenomena has become a fashionable pursuit. It tells tales of the »good old times« in a pre-capitalist, pluralistic society whose supposedly humane attitudes distinguished it from our age of globalization; still, it is exactly such labels as »non-conformist« or »multinational« that guarantee *rebetiko's* ongoing, albeit modest, commercial success. An air of insubordination – which is directed at the cultural and economic hegemony of the West¹⁶ – seems to make *rebetiko* appeal to people in both countries who expect it to offer a relief of the conformity caused by modern mass culture.

In spite of its ability to absorb heterogeneous elements, *rebetiko* often reveals a divisive nature. It is a music which is likely to impassion people: Some are irritated, others fascinated; but they all regard it as something extraordinary.¹⁷ I suppose the same holds true for many phenomena associated with marginal groups all over the world. We scientists, however, ought not to study *rebetiko* with the purpose of proving its value as a cultural product of a ›truly‹ Greek or Ottoman or, for that matter, of a genuinely ›hybrid‹ (that is, a dual) nature. We should attempt to reach a position which enables us to examine such a highly syncretistic music from an alternative, demystifying viewpoint. As I have tried to demonstrate, juxtaposing divergent national perceptions thereof can be one way of accomplishing this task.

15 E-mail correspondence, April 10, 2005.

16 Orestis Linderemayer, »Greeks, the West and the ›Rest‹ (Slavs, Vlachs, Albanians and Turks): Anthropological Reflections on Michael Herzfeld's Work«, in: *Ethnologia* 6–7 (1998–1999), p. 359–439, examines the history of the ambivalent attitude of modern Greeks towards ›Europe‹.

17 See the *rebetiko* controversy in Greek Left press (1946–1988) as analyzed in Kostas Vlisidis, *Aspects of Rebetiko*, Athens 2004, p. 67–164.