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Hearing Sonic Memories of Evliyâ Çelebi: Ottoman Guilds of Seventeenth-Century Istanbul

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Written transmissions of auditory experiences of the past contain both individual and collective representations of sensory data in relation to culture, space and time. The sensorial and historical turn in sound studies and urban musicology on auditory cultures underline the significance of examining sensorial elements of perceptual constructions. Sonic elements of sensory experiences resonating from historical narratives on urban spaces and communities could offer significant clues to auditory memories of the society and the city itself. This paper examines auditory data from the Ottoman traveller Evliyâ Çelebi's (1611–c.1685) idiosyncratic account on Ottoman guilds of seventeenth-century Istanbul.¹ As a window into the sonic routines in the multicultural and multilingual cityscape of Istanbul, Evliyâ's accounts highlights certain sonic and linguistic guild practices in the urban space.

Evliyâ Çelebi's ten-volume travelogue *Seyahatnâme* (Book of Travels) spanning imperial and surrounding lands contains detailed ear-witnessing depictions. Based on the recorded inventory ordered by Murad IV (r. 1623–40) in 1638 before

1 Evliyâ Çelebi b. Derviş Mehmed Zillî, *Evliyâ Çelebi Seyahatnâmesi*. (eds. Seyit Ali Kahraman, Yücel Dağlı, Robert Dankoff, Zekeriya Kurşun, İbrahim Sezgin) (Istanbul, 2011), I: 253–359.

his Baghdad campaign, Evliyâ Çelebi dedicates 47 chapters of the first volume² to the Istanbul guilds parading before the sultan in the first volume of *Seyahatnâme*.

Guild parades organized by the Ottoman rulers before a military campaign were used to reinforce intend to reinforce the rule of the sultan and the state within the public sphere. Imperial festivals that lasted several days or weeks include entertainments, royal weddings or circumcision ceremonies accompanied by guild parades. Through the political, social, economic and religious functions of these festivals³, the court sought to glorify the imperial power in the urban space. Imperial festivals occasioned by circumcision ceremonies of sultan's children or wedding celebrations of sultan's daughter are usually recorded by literary texts, namely *surnâmes*. The first examples of *surnâmes* were written for the 52-day long festival on the occasion of Murad III's son Mehmed III's circumcision ceremony by Âlî Mustafa Efendi and İntizâmî in 1582, The last surname was *Sûrnâme-i Selâtin* for the wedding of Cemile Sultan and Münire Sultan, the daughters of Sultan Abdülmecid, in 1858.⁴ Ottoman guilds played a main role in parades and the procession order of the guilds were even organised hierarchically (Fig.1, p. 4). Evliyâ transmits several accounts on the conflicts of procession order between some guilds such as the dispute about the precedence between the Istanbul butchers and the traders of Egyptian goods.⁵ As stated by Evliyâ at the end of each chapter, the procession of the main and subsidiary guilds included each guild's own janissary bands.

Sonic practices of the guilds in various oral forms such as prayer phrases, musical executions, shoutings, utterings or hubbubs are frequently textualized by Evliyâ. In this context, his account on the guilds of Istanbul represents glimpses of aural space for possible daily sounds of the city as well. One of these sounds heard along the parade was "eyya mola, ya mola" or "eyya moli, ya moli", exclamations ty-

2 Although Evliyâ Çelebi (*Seyahatnâme*, I: 253) states that he will use 57 chapters to cover the guilds of Istanbul, the chapters are 47, corrected by R. Dankoff as well. R. Dankoff, *An Ottoman Mentality: The World of Evliyâ Çelebi* (Leiden, 2006), 14. At the same section, Evliyâ also gives the number of guilds in Istanbul as 1100. This number presumably indicates the richness of the city merchants. E. Yi points out that this number is the result of a simplistic translation of *esnâf* as guilds since *tâife* or *esnâf* could loosely designate a much wider range of social categories beyond that of organized trade groups. E. Yi, *Guild Dynamics in Seventeenth-Century Istanbul: Fluidity and Leverage* (Leiden, 2004).

3 M. And, *Kırk Gün Kırk Gece: Osmanlı Düğünleri, Şenlikleri, Geçit Alayları* (İstanbul 2020), 22–31.

4 For an anthological study on *surnâme* genre see M. Arslan, *Osmanlı Saray Düğünleri ve Şenlikleri* (İstanbul, 2008).

5 *Seyahatnâme*, 1:274–5. For further discussion on the scheduling and choreography of guild parade in 1720 festival organized on the occasion of circumcision ceremony of Ahmed III's four sons (Şehzâde Süleyman, Mustafa, Mehmed, Bayezid), see S.E. İşkorkutan, *The 1720 imperial festival in Istanbul: festivity and representation in the early eighteenth-century Ottoman Empire*, Boğaziçi University PhD thesis, 2017.



Fig. 1. A section of the guild parade from the 1712 festival of Ahmed III including *kavâfs* (seller and maker of cheap shoes), presumably *manavân* (sellers of green groceries and fruit) and *kavukcuyân* (quilted cap or turban sellers) accompanied at the end of the row by musicians playing traditional instruments such as *çöğür* and *zurna*. [Surnâme-i Vehbî, miniature by Levnî. Topkapı Palace Museum Library, A3593, fol. 108a]

pically shouted by sailors and rope makers (Fig. 2, p. 5), supposedly with rhythmic execution.⁶

Evliyâ's accounts of Ottoman guilds include several linguistic portraits of ethnic groups living in the multicultural cityscape of seventeenth-century Istanbul. Despite the phonetic limitations of the Ottoman Turkish script, Evliyâ attempts to imitate several dialects of Turkish in a written form that are associated with the ethnic groups. Some dialects he mentions in the guilds section of *Seyahatnâme* are Albanian, Armenian, Arabic and Laz. While his vocabulary for dialectical representations varies depending on the context, the most frequent words encountered for dialect are *lehçe* and *ağız*. In particular accounts such as *Badanacı Ermeniler*

6 (Seyahatnâme, I:268–9, 272–3). This exclamation literally means “pull away boys!; yo, heave ho!; yo-ho-ho with different regional variants. H. & R. Kahane and A. Tietze, *The Lingua Franca in the Levant: Turkish Nautical Terms of Italian and Greek Origin* (Leiden, 1958), 205–8.

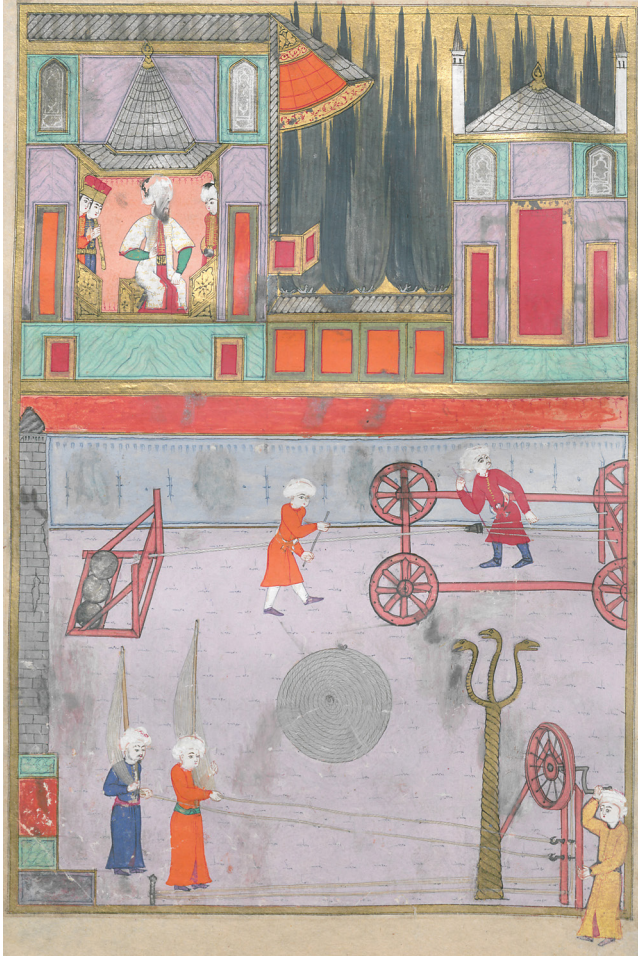


Fig. 2. Guild of *urgancıyân* in the 1582 festival. [Surnâme-i Hümâyûn, miniature presumably by Nakkaş Osman. Topkapı Palace Museum Library, H1344, fol. 396a.]

(Armenian calciminers), he attempts to represent the dialect of the ethnic group in Ottoman Turkish.⁷ Apart from the dialect, Evliyâ also mentions different languages heard within the city such as Albanian, Armenian and Greek. In the section titled *Kaldırmacı Arnavudlar* (Albanian pavers), he records a *murabba'* (quatrain based song) chanted by the pavers with the language of Albanians from Elbasan region.⁸ Albanians are also one of the most frequent mentioned ethnic groups by Evliyâ as well (Fig. 3, p. 6).

While the guild parade tolerates social outcasts such as beggars and pickpockets in a public space, some guild are subsidiary guilds (*yamak*) of a main guild that were larger or more important depending on the importance of craft or trade.⁹ The guild of *bozahânegiler* (shopkeepers who sell fermented drink *boza* made of millet), mostly either Tatars or Romanis, was the last main guild of the procession

7 Evliyâ, *Seyahatnâme*, 1:340.

8 *Ibid*, 1:340.

9 Yi, *Guild Dynamics in Seventeenth-Century Istanbul: Fluidity and Leverage*, 105–6. See also: S. Faruqi, *Artisans of Empire: Crafts and Craftspeople under the Ottomans* (New York, 2009).



Fig 3. Seller of Albanian liver, presumably listed by Evliyâ under *esnâf-ı ciğerciân-ı koyun* (2011-I, p. 1/282). [Engraving by Gérard Scoting, 1714, based on painting by Jean-Baptiste Vanmour (1671-1737), Collection: Recueil de cent estampes representant différentes nations du Levant, The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art.]

mentioned by Evliyâ with their exclamational yelling as “biruy hay”.¹⁰ Since selling alcohol is only allowed by non-Muslim merchants, the *meyhâneçiler* (tavern-keepers) of Istanbul were listed under the guild of *bozahâneçiler*. The sounds resonating from this section by the tavern-keepers include Greek folk songs performed in a *makâm* of *Rehâvî* and *Nikrîz* with a sorrowful and artistic singing style accompanied by various instruments such as bagpipes, English horns and organ. According to another account of Evliyâ, guilds of *lu’bedbâzân* (puppeteer), *mudhikân* (comedian) and *mukallidân* (imitators) consist of public performances of idiosyncratic imitations of social classes or ethnic groups such as Georgian imitations by *Akîde branch* (orig. *kol*).¹¹ Echoes of rhythmic patterns rising in the soundscape of the city are also represented by Evliyâ since he was well-educated, talented musician with sensitive ears. In the account on the guild of *hallâcân-ı pembe* (cotton or wool pluffers), he first mentions that they were beating the strings of their bows in a harmonious manner; and he depicts the rhythm of their bows as “tır tika tır tık tır

¹⁰ Evliyâ, *Seyahatnâme*, 1:353–4.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 1:347–53.

tır tık tıka” in *usûl* (rhythmic cycle) *düyek* which corresponds with the eight beat pattern (8/8 or 8/4) of Turkish music.¹²

In order to understand the auditory trajectory of the guild parade conveyed by Evliyâ, identifying expressions of aural actions would be beneficial for semiotic analysis. This approach could also exemplify the linguistic representation of auditory experiences based on Evliyâ’s account. In the auditory depictions included in the guild section of *Seyahatnâme*, the most frequently encountered auditory action is the word “feryâd”. Derived from the Persian word *faryâd* meaning help, this word primarily means loud and strong shouting, yelling and screaming. The combined use of the word with *figân*, “feryâd ü figân”, which reinforces the meaning of begging, whimpering and groaning, could also indicate that a loud cry is an act of complaint in the form of a whining, burning emotionally. The second most common auditory action in the guild section of the *Seyahatnâme* is the expression “hây-hû”, which means noisy entertainment that occurs when multiple voices are intermingled. This word, which consist of imitation words *hây* and its labialization counterpart *hûy* or *hû*¹³, is a usage that also represents the complexity of the sounds emitted by guilds during the processions. The word *şadâ* which means “echo, resonance” in Arabic and “sound” in Persian, is another auditory word that is also commonly used in *Seyahatnâme*. Other frequently used words, which mostly refer to the human voice, are Persian origin “âvâz” and Arabic origin “savt”. These words usually appear in the sound descriptions of Evliyâ for the sounds of the guilds. The timbral and sensual expressions used together with these words for the timbres and emotions of sounds are “hûb- âvâz” and “hoş- âvâz”, which describe the beauty of the voice; “savt-ı Dâvûdî” meaning loud and deep like the Prophet David; “savt-ı hazîn”, which represents a sad, mournful, gloomy voice; and “savt-ı muhrik” meaning heartbreaking, touching. This semantic data provides elemental signs to deconstruct the semiotic structure of Evliyâ’s transmission of auditory experiences that consist of loud yellings, mournful whinings, and intermingled noises. Since the auditory vocabulary of timbres and emotions also represents sensory values of aural perceptions within the particular culture, deep, gloomy and heartbreaking voices could be defined as highly valued auditory experiences.

The sonic memories of seventeenth-century Istanbul transmitted by *Seyahatnâme* represent various auditory layers of urban space through Evliyâ’s peculiar depictions. From the textualized echoes of guild utterings that are heard in the city streets to the various dialects of Turkish by different ethnic groups of the city, aural

12 Ibid, 1:319.

13 A. Tietze, *Tarihi ve Etimolojik Türkiye Türkçesi Lügati* (Wien, 2009), II:285.

elements of these transmissions accompanied by spatial and temporal data create a particular historical narrative on the auditory memory of the city itself.

In his article on Evliyâ Çelebi, Jacob Olley, Research Associate on the UK Research and Innovation project *Ottoman Auralities and the Eastern Mediterranean: Sound, Media and Power, 1789–1922* at the University of Cambridge, emphasizes how the performative act of reading a manuscript as a material object involves a conceptual shift of listening to textual representations of past experiences through sensory modes of knowing.¹⁴ In a similar manner, hearing subjective resonances of exclamations, dialects, timbres and emotions arising from his transmissions steadily include an act of critical interpretation. This hermeneutic aspect is also an act of critical extraction on understanding individual and collective representations of urban communities. Therefore Evliyâ's sonic depictions on the seventeenth-century Ottoman Istanbul that are exemplified in this paper provide different types of sensorial data on the auditory experiences of past urban communities.

14 J. Olley, 'Evliyâ's Song: Listening to the Early Modern Ottoman Court', *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 76/3 (2023): 645–703.

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