

# As the Representative of an Ancient Tradition:

*Muharrem Ertas and Bozlaks*<sup>1</sup>

*Representantes de una antigua tradición:*

*Muharrem Ertas y Bozlaks*

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## Abstract

Anatolian geography has been a frequent destination for ancient cultures with its rich and deep cultural background. As a result of the historical past is substantial in the formation of Turkish traditional music. Bozlak is a substantial musical form which is unmetered in Turkish folk music. This particular musical style can be heard in various regions of Turkey. The aim of this study is to reveal within Turkish folk songs, the importance of Muharrem Ertas and his musical identity as a minstrel, beside his representation of *bozlak* style. Within this context, some significant issues of his musical identity, region's cultural and historical background will be reflected upon.

**Key Words:** Turkish Folk Music, Bozlak, Muharrem Ertas, Abdal, Middle Anatolia

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## Resumen

La geografía de Anatolia ha sido un destino frecuente para las culturas antiguas con su rico y profundo trasfondo cultural. Debido a que la historia es importante en la formación de la música tradicional turca. Bozlak es una forma musical sustancial que no se mide en la música folclórica turca. Este estilo musical particular se puede escuchar en varias regiones de Turquía. El objetivo de este estudio es revelar, dentro de las canciones populares turcas, la importancia de Muharrem Ertas y su identidad musical como juglar, además de su representación del estilo bozlak. En este contexto, se reflexionará sobre algunas cuestiones significativas de su identidad musical, el trasfondo cultural e histórico de la región.

**Palabras clave:** Música popular turca, Bozlak, Muharrem Ertas, Abdal, Anatolia central

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**D**rought, famine, intense population growth, wars, and conflicts between tribes in Central Asia were the main reasons that lead the Turks to migrate (Dikici, 1998:10). Turks who met Islam in the X. century. In the 19th century, the Turks migrated and spread throughout Central Asia to Anatolia (Günay & Güngör, 1997:288). Kırşehir province has also been an important Turkish province that continues to develop and promote the Turkish characteristics brought from Asia (Sürmeli, 1971:32-33). This ancient town has a significant place in the Turkification of Anatolia, and in the creation of the Turkish social and religious organization network in various periods of history. In the XIII. century, the Ahi organization, which was established in Kırşehir as the organization of leather workers under the leadership of Ahi Evren and later turned into a large professional organization, left its mark on the social and economic life for a period. The music that Turks have used as a motivation tool for a long time (Demirel, 2022), it also contains cultural elements. We can see that musical lessons are given to talented people in Ahi lodges (İnalçık, 1999:192-193; Ekinci, 1990:37). In this respect, Kırşehir is significant in terms of figuring out how different, unique, and ancient the music of the city's cultural potential is.

The concept of “Abdal”, which constitutes the cultural building blocks that we have discussed regarding our subject, is important. It should be considered in terms of its connection with bozlak or bozlaks, which is a musical-literary structure intertwined with this concept. Based on these, we know that the people with the titles of “abdal”, “baba”, and “bab”,

who played important roles in the Turkification of Anatolia, also applied the Islamized form of the old belief of the Turks to the people. These people were holy, who had characteristics such as Korkut Ata, the first minstrel and wise speaker. Considering that the great mystics migrated to Anatolia through the ancient Turkestan geography, they brought many cultural elements, especially the spiritual climate of Turkestan to Anatolia. Based on these, the emergence of wise people with these titles from the Kırşehir region have caused some cultural reflections.

## As Folk Poets

### *Abdals*

Scholars, mystics and craftsmen brought the cultural heritage of their neighbourhoods to Anatolia (Sümer, 1960: 592-594). These dervishes bearing the names “Abdal” and “Baba” are also called “Horasan Erenleri” (Barkan, 1942:282). The Turkish-speaking people, who were far from any influence of the urban Iranian culture, listened enthusiastically to the sermons of these figures, who were called “abdal”, “baba”, “dede”, and applied what they said (Köprülü, 2005: 30). As we understand, these wise men were acting as a kind of poet-ashik. It is a necessity for the religious believers to see the Islamized form of the old Turkish Kam-Poets in the Turkmen Fathers, who are Hakveli (Köprülü, 2005:19).

Bard-Kam-Bakı's are wise people. With the Turks' acceptance of Islam, “Turkmen Babalar” took their place. Anatolian abdals, ghazis or winners in the establishment of the Ottoman Empire, together with the ahis and Bacıyan-ı Rûm, are the social groups that received great services (Köprülü, 1988: 61-62). These groups took active roles in the establishment of the Ottoman Empire. The fact that Anatolian Abdals are mostly in Alevi areas is a very important point in transporting Alevi creeds. However, since this issue has not been studied thoroughly, it is not possible to distinguish the Abdals in Anatolia from the Anatolian Alevi Turks, who do not have the slightest doubt about their Turkishness, and who still hide the traces of the old Turkish Shamanism (Köprülü, 1989:26) It is noteworthy that male shamans are called Abidal in Yakut Turks in Northern Siberia (Köprülü, 1988:62). Abdals scattered in various parts of Anatolia were either completely eliminated in many regions due to social and political reasons or were unjustly mistaken for gypsies. However, the abdals have nothing to do with the gypsies or the sifters. Merely the similarity in craft and trade life caused them to be confused with each

other, and in a way, each of them preserved their own ethnic existence (Caferoğlu, 1953:77-79). Abdals think that the Seljuk Turks interacted with the Turkmen tribes who migrated from Horasan during their settlement in Anatolia, and that they went to Anatolia together with them (Yükselsin, 2000:51). Abdals not only refuse to look like Gypsies, but also emphasize that they are of Turkmen origin. It is known that there were 84,000 tents, 80,000 Turkmen and 4,000 Abdals, who migrated from Horasan to Sivas, Yozgat, and then to Gaziantep, Kahramanmaraş, Şanlıurfa and Hatay regions and further south (Guzelbey, 1959:16). In the studies carried out by Eröz, we come across the Ephthalit tribes named Abdal in Andolu (Eröz, 1984:46).

In Anatolia, abdals live in Denizli, Dinar, Sivas, Çorum, Kırşehir, Karaman, Mut, Elmalı regions (Köprülü, 1989:338). Türkay (1979) also made important determinations about the tribes and obas named Abdal, according to the Ottoman Archives. Abdals are professional musicians of Anatolian Turkmen. The Sunni peasant tassubu left the instrument and the folk song to the Abdals. They faithfully continue Turkish folk music and dance culture (Ülkütaşır, 1968:252-253).

## As Ancient Turkish Town

### *Kırşehir's Musical Culture*

When examining folk music today, when we observe the elements that we attribute privilege under the name of local music from the perspective of history, it is observed that they emerge based on a certain central concentration in terms of politics, culture, and economy. Especially during the Turkification of Anatolian the following stages: the settlement status of the tribes and the obas (Dulkadiroğulları, Aydınnoğulları) who succeeded in establishing political power from these tribes; a the remnants of their cultural and political centers giving rise to the concept we call "region" in music today. In other words, the cultural atmosphere given by the political authority creates a center and becomes a style by entering into a new cultural formation under the patronage of the neck to which it is attached (Başer, 2006:15).

If we take these valued provisions into consideration for Kırşehir, the two main vein sources it feeds on affect the musical tradition. Firstly, starting from His Holiness Hacı Bektas Veli, are those who sing about the truth and the people, such as Aşık Pasha, Ahmet Gülşehri, Süleyman Türkmani, and Ahi Evren.

Another factor is due to Kırşehir having a dense Turkmen population, bringing poetry, music, science, philosophy, and the beliefs brought by nomadic Turkmen tribes from Central Asia. The influence of abdals in Kırşehir's musical culture is quite evident.

Since Kırşehir was established on a busy road at the junction of the roads opening to Anatolia, it was a message that Anatolian lovers frequented. The saz minstrels (asiks), known as “the strange travelers of the heavens”, meet with the lovers in the corners of the inns, run around and hang puzzles, and show up in traditional conversation gatherings that keep the taste of old folklore alive. In those times in Kırşehir, there were generally no non-drinking women in the conversation meetings of middle-aged people. A *fasil* was opened with a piece of music called “Peşrev”, and the conversation was continued with melodious sayings of famous lovers, especially lovers, such as *divan*, *koşma*, *semai* (Cihan, 1990:57). An entertainment world dominated by music and games, which lived in Kırşehir recently, is “Muhabbet” (Yönetken, 1966:45). Violin, *baglama*, *darbuka*, or *def*, called “fine saz” in conversations was played with accompaniment (Yurt Encyclopedia, 1982:4963).

Abdals called the last repetition at the end of the dance songs “bitirim”. When finishing a folk song that has lyrics, it starts again. In the Alevi-Bektashi village, Cem rituals are also performed. Sayings are said, *semah3s* are performed (Turhan *et al.*, 2000:8).

A woman named “köçek” is accompanied by the violin and saz, just as weddings are performed with drums and zurna. It is also performed to the accompaniment of oriental dances with a man disguised. The environment also is called “instrumentalist” and “abdal” (Coşkun, 1983:20). A few of the Kırşehir abdals instruments consisting of a combination of *baglama* and instruments such as *darbuka* (*dumbelek*), bell, and *kaval*, also make music with their teams (Duygulu, 1997:114; Özhan, 1991:452). Non-verbal and purely instrumental pieces are not found in Kırşehir (Yağmur, 2007:56).

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3. Semahs are performed through dancers, accompanied via devout musicians playing the saz-baglama. Semah has seen in Alevi-Bektaşî congregations in Turkey, each with diverse musical characteristics and rhythmic formations.



Kırşehir Köçek dancers (Erkan, 2010: 56)

There are similarities with the musical attitudes of Ankara in some melodies, and the musical attitudes of Central Anatolia in others. Layouts used in bindings; disordered order, binding order, and marble order are used (Cihan, 1990:70). The Anatolian Abdals tuned the middle string to the lower string unison, making it “A-A G” from the “kırık düzen”.<sup>4</sup> They created this order in the sense of the order (düzen) used by the Abdals, “Abdal düzeni” or sometimes “Bozlak düzeni” (Parlak, 1990:83). One by one top-double tanning style is observed. *Çubuk Uzun*, the most popular folk song is the air. In a way, this is one of the melodies in which the instrumentalists show their skills. Düzen means tuning of strings on bağlama. Instrument artists who cannot play *Çubuk Uzun* cannot gain respect. Two and four in timed methods are also common. Apart from these, five, three, nine, and fifteen rhythmic times are also available. (Cihan, 1990:70; Seyfeli, 1997:132).

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4. String groups can be tuned in a variety of ways, known as düzen (literally, *order*).

## A Traditional Musical Form:

### *Bozlaks*

The concept of Bozlak, as we know, is a concept that covers Central Anatolia in Turkish folk music. Apart from being unmetred folk song, it is also a type of traditional music form, especially in Çukurova and in the South. It appears as story songs. Bozlaks are religious, and religious traditions that the Turkish nation lived, and continued to live for centuries, are probably a result of geographical, literary, social, and cultural events. These traditions were born in Asia and came with the migration of Turks from Khorasan to Anatolia, especially Central Anatolia where Turkmen tribes settled, Central Taurus Mountains, and Çukurova. By gaining a strong personality in the sections facing the Taurus Mountains, it is common for large masses of people.

In terms of dictionary meaning; “to shout, to call, to make a sound”, in the sense of “breaking”, it comes from the infinitives of “to put it out” (Atalay, 1986:110). “To call, to bellow, to whine, to wail, to shout, to cry, to whine, also carries meanings (Turkish World Literature Concepts and Terms Encyclopedic Dictionary, 2001:467). “Camel shout” in Antalya Serik, “water roaring in Isparta” (Obruk, 1983; Ergün, 1938).

According to the rumor, the male camel smells the scent of the female camel from afar and breaks down and bellows, and the female camel responds. “Bozlak” from the spoiling of the male camel, the return of the female camel, and the concept of “yeast” emerged from the Maya, and is another name for the female camel.

“Bozlak” and “maya” are known as unmetred folk song form or styles in Turkish folk music, and it can be said that the concepts were born (Karakuş, 2005:13). Since Bozlak is a Turkish word, it has similar meanings in the Turkish World (Turkish World Literature Concepts and Terms Dictionary, 2001:467).

As bozlak in Azerbaijan means “to cry out loud,” its meaning in modern day use is “to shout loudly” in slang language (Altaylı, 1994:149). In Kazakhstan, “bozda-bozdav” means “camel’s cry, sobbing and a making a sound with rhythm” (Koç *et al.*, 2003:68; Altay, 1981:63).

Bozlimak-bozlidı in the Uyghurs means “yelling, sobbing, painful sad voice” (Necip, 2008:50) in the same way that “Abdurrahman

Han” belongs to the Eastern Turks in his epic, “he cried again, he cried out” (Özkan, 1989:124), in Kyrgyz Instrumental music. As a bozdok; “Weeping with grief, the shouting of the camel” means we see. In Nogai Turks, bozlav (bozlak) is the equivalent of the laments sung upon death. It is used so that it has a detached structure like the laments in Turkey (Yakıcı, 2007: 386).

Azerbaijani musicologist Halikzade explained the agi-bozlak relationship as follows:

In “Kitab-ı Dede Korkut”, one of the oldest folklore tunes, is a type of lament (lament) although when it was heard, it was not expressed with a clear understanding. But in the language of the epic, the busy one now, the word “breaking”, which remains as a residue, is like “moaning the dice, the dice” The expressions are the type of ağı (lament) found in the folklore of Turkish people and is derived from it, which sheds light on the etymology of names in the same forms” (Halikzade, 2000). He emphasized that bozlak is an ancient word and is used by all Turkish people and emphasized that it could be a concept derived from laments.

While those who researched the story genre in verbal literature defined bozlak as a narrative/story type, musicology researchers accepted it as a music genre included in the irregular melodies of verbal music (Şenel 1992:55-81). While Bozlak was a folk song about the tragic events in the places where the Turkmen tribes wandered, it became a tradition and continued its main character in the Taurus Mountains in Central Anatolia, especially in the places where Abdals lived intensively (Parlak, 1990).

Today, bozlak type is recognized as a literary and musical expression of Turkmen tribes settled in Central and Southern Anatolia. We witness the love adventures of the saz poets who lived in the Southern Anatolian Region, stretching from the Taurus to Çukurova, and many events that have an important place in the lives of the people of yore, circulating in a way that has a unique style and melody (Mirzaoğlu, 1998:410). This way of saying, which consists essentially of a folk song but tells about a special event, is referred to as bozlak (Mirzaoğlu, 2003:7).

Since there are many tales of the Bozlaks, they must have been born like folk tales. In folk tales, the verse parts complete the prose, while in the bozlaks, the prose completes the verse parts, or establishes a connection between the verses and provides the transition. Every grizzly tale is derived from a story. The verse parts were born from these stories.



There are also bozlaks that are written and read in the type of coaching, which have no story or whose prose parts are unknown today (*Turkish World Literature Concepts and Terms Dictionary*, 2001:468).

Bozlak is undoubtedly an unmetered folk song dependent species. Frankly, it is an ambiguous concept. In general, it can be said that most of them have 11 syllable lines in their lyrics. It has a definite structural form. In terms of subject, it resembles love songs. The concepts of unmetered folk song and bozlak are often mentioned together. (Bartok, 1991:222).

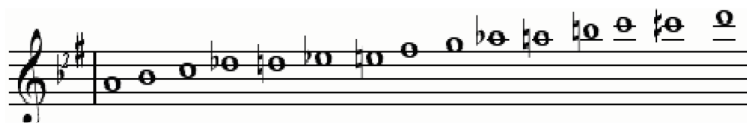
It also happens that it is called bozlak by its short story which illuminates the subject of its Turk: Ahmet Bey Bozlağı, Cin Ali Bozlağı, Yusuf Bozlağı etc. (*Turkish Encyclopedia*, 1956:10). There are many varieties of Bozlak such as: tribe, animal, city, and they are named according to the name of the person or events. Examples are Turkmen, Avşar, İlbeylioğlu, Cerit, Tecirlioğlu, Urum, Düdem, Kırat, Kırşehir, Çukurova, Gavurdağı, Karacaoğlan, and Iraz etc. Some bozlaks are also named according to the words at the beginning of the words such as Aydest Bozlağı, which begins with the exclamation of Aydest (Küçükçelebi, 2002:25-26).

## Musical Structure

### *of Bozlaks*

Bozlak and bozlak scales according to features such as maqam navigational characteristics and faults are shown below. Bozlaks resembling Hüseyini, Muhayyer maqam scales. As stated and explained above in many ways, this musical form is significant unmetered style within Turkish folk music, therefore transferred from master to apprentice.

Figure 1  
Avsar



As seen above, Muhayyer Kürdi, Bozlaks resembling the Kürdili Hicazkar maqam scales,



## A Minstrel from Middle Anatolian:

*Muharrem Ertaş*

In addition to the fact that Muharrem Ertaş is known and accepted as a bozlak master, when Kırşehir is mentioned, the first thing that comes to mind is the music of that region and its bozlaks. Bozlak readers and aerators are mostly abdals. All these factors are related to each other in Kırşehir musical culture.

Muharrem Ertaş was born in 1913 in Kırşehir's Yağmurlu Büyük Oba village. According to the rumor, a great tribe that came from Horasan and settled in Yağmurlu Büyükoba village, the ancestors of Ertaş, is known as the "Deveci tribe" (Tokel, 2000:68-69). His father is Zurnacı Kara Ahmet and his mother is Ayşe Hanım. It is rumored that Zurnacı Kara Ahmet was also a very good reader (Tokel, 2000:17). Muharrem Ertaş did not receive a specific education, but he is one of our artists who raised himself in the vast folk cultural university of our people, which is called the "school of hard knocks," meaning tradition-custom and life. In Muharrem Ertaş, an artist who is extremely devoted to tradition and does not compromise, the purest, plainest, and distinguished bozlaks can be seen. There is an Asian atmosphere in the bozlaks, which this great artist, who does not bear any trace of corruption, plays and sings with great care, ecstatic as if he is experiencing the event (Şen and Aksu, 1999:108).

He started playing bağlama at the age of 5-6 with the help of his uncle Bulduk Usta. After a while, he did not find his self-contained studies sufficient and started to sing and play alongside Yusuf Usta, one of the better masters. Yusuf Usta taught Muharrem Ertaş the poems and sayings of Âşık Sait, who received them from the old masters and saz poets of the region. Ertaş, who developed his instrument and voice after the age of 5-6, increased the pieces in his repertoire, and spread as far as Yozgat and Ankara. Muharrem Ertaş, married his wife, Hatice Hanım, and left Kırşehir after his wife's death, and continued his art in settlements such as Çiçekdağı, Yerköy, Keskin, and Kırıttılar. He married Döne Hanım in Kırıttılar village to the İbikli village of Çiçekdağı. settled. He had five children named Necati, Neşet, Ayşe, Nadiye, and Muhterem (Kaymak, 1989:6; Yıldırım, 2004:60). Neşet Ertaş and Keskinli Hacı Taşandır, who first fell in love with him, were among the apprentices that Muharrem Ertaş raised (İvgin, 1985:110).

It is not a distant date yet for the *Kirsehir Abdals* to settle down. They were again, in his own words, “mostly itinerants”. The greatest contribution of these wanderings to Anatolian culture is that they played the role of carrier of the old Turkmen culture. As a matter of fact, the famous bozlak master Muharrem Ertaş has “travelling” in his life as well as in his genealogy (Yılmaz, 2006:283).

*My interest in playing and singing started at a young age. My uncle named Bulduk had a beautiful voice. He sang folk songs in one village and rested in the other village. Even during the mobilization, the officers would take my uncle with them and wander around the village to catch the deserters. They would make my uncle sing folk songs and they would lie in ambush and catch the fugitives coming down from the mountains to the village to my uncle's voice. Then Yusuf Usta liked me very much, when he saw my curiosity, he took me with him. He took me everywhere he went, took me with him at weddings, holidays and entertainments. He took it wherever he went. He also taught me what he learned from the masters by staying with him at weddings, holidays, entertainments. After working with him for seven years, he started to sing and sing alone (Tokel, 2000:69).*



Turkish folk music singer Sumer Ezgu & Muharrem Ertaş

## Results

### *and Discussion*

Kırşehir province has been important in history, like many important central cities in Anatolia. It is an important center that contains many historical, political, cultural, and scientific elements. With the beginning of the Turkification of Anatolia, the choice of great scientists who emigrated from the geography of Turkestan to this region has directed our attention to Kırşehir. The possibility of giving the name “Rose-city” gave us some clues.

With the intensification of immigration from Asia here, this region has become the geographical location of their homeland. The reason it is called rose-city is because it has gained the feature of being a rich city, created by its literary, economic, scientific and artistic patronage. Based on the information and findings we obtained from the sources, we see that important people of science and art live in the Kırşehir region. The fact that the Kırşehir region is confronted as a socio-cultural structure in the Anatolian geography today enabled us to look at our study from a purely historical perspective.

The folk music of a region absolutely interacts with the social life, style, history, and beliefs of that region. As we are of the opinion that in order to understand Muharrem Ertaş and his creativity, it is necessary to understand all the cultural connections with which his region interacts. Based on the historical and cultural background of this region, some results have been obtained. The real nature of the people with the title of Abdal, who played an important role in the Turkification of Anatolia, has been associated with today’s abdal groups. Today, these communities are seen not only in Kırşehir, but also in all Turkish communities, especially in the Anatolian geography.

Muharrem Ertaş is not only a poet of the abdal tribe, the messages that his art and works convey to us from the past draw attention, understandable from the instrument he played, from all the works he read and performed, and even from the arrangement he used. In order to better understand Muharrem Ertaş, there is information available on those who perform ablution. Especially in terms of construction and calling the shaman “abidal” in the Altai, also attracted our attention. As we cannot deduce in general, the limitation of the abdal’s duties is that they are a small Turkish community and that they have the appearance of an old “ozan-baksı” appearance due to their origin.

How the abdal communities living in Kırşehir continued their lives in the headquarters and how they isolated them from the people in the region was highly appealing. By adopting their music professionally, they were perceived as different from the norm. Abdals are a Turkmen community and do not have a different language. In particular, they primarily use Ahmet Caferoğlu's own speech, and they do not have a separate language. This situation has the effect of attitudes-style in musical dialects. Continuing to listen to the music in Kırşehir, their community is being preserved. In the musical structure of the region, there is the *meşk* (*meshk*) method in our classical music and the master-apprentice relationship.

We have seen that the concept of Bozlak is a structure that can carry different meanings apart from the musical meaning used in Anatolian Turks. In the scans made about the etymology of the word, this concept is encountered in the geographies where Turkish communities live. We have determined that this word is an old word that is very rarely used in other Turkish communities, close to its known meaning in Anatolia. In short, the concept of bozlak has the same etymological meanings. In terms of musical aspects, this concept is known as a type of long air in Turkish Folk Music. Today it is known as a type of long air performed by abdals, especially in the province of Kırşehir, which covers the Central Anatolian region. Our aim is to better understand the origin of the Bozlags and to find common ground. Although it is not used as a musical term in most Turkish communities, it has binding elements in terms of its etymological meanings. Muharrem Ertaş's poor and suffering life and his "traveler" spirit constituted a reason for producing these works.

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