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ON THE CYPRIOT DIALECTS

“Love for the language you speak is the sensation of another reality.”

1.

The debate over the language problem (Greek or English) in Cyprus today is, like all debates among intellectuals, misleading. The debate senses the problem only to express it in distorted terms.

The real linguistic problem in Cyprus, for centuries now, has been the divide between the written language (or the language used for mass and long-term communication) and the spoken language — between the mainland Greek [kalamaristika] language (or English or Turkish) spoken and still spoken by the various powers-that-be in this country (priests, aghas, teachers, politicians) and the language of the street and everyday life.

Language is above all a social relationship. When priests chant for centuries in an incomprehensible language, when the language of the authorities is different from the language of ordinary people, the message is clear: some people possess “the correct way of speaking,” which is a sign of their “refinement and superiority.” The language of everyday life is “barbaric,” “village-like,” “simplistic,” “vulgar.” Anyone who speaks it should be ashamed. The servility of Cypriots today in front of the judge, the priest, the teacher, the policeman is deeply rooted in shame and fear, because they will always let slip the spoken “jai” instead of “kai” — and the teacher will always be angry.

2.

In the real world of people who cry, laugh, get angry, swear at each other, and love one another, there are only dialects — and Cyprus has many dialects, not just one. The “languages” we learn at school are codes of reference — and just as no one goes for a walk in the forest carrying physics equations, no one uses the official grammar in everyday life. “Languages” were codified by intellectuals in the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries in an attempt to provide a uniform, homogeneous language for the authority of the state, which imposed its authority on a heterogeneous population speaking many dialects, on the pretext that they all belonged to the same nation. Nation-state-dominant language are components of the modern ideology of the state, which leads to cultural leveling and the suppression of creativity. It is no coincidence that the only spaces of creativity over the last few centuries have been those of the marginalized (from rebetiko in our neighborhoods, to JAZZ and ROCK music in America, to Modernism in poetry and painting, etc.) — belonging to the majority leads to intellectual numbness in exchange for security. The marginalized are among the few minorities who understand the artificiality of majorities — and try to function as autonomous communities.

Basil plant with lush green leaves

ya prakların yeşildir

(with the green leaves)

her two breasts upon her bosom

paralarını peşin verdim

(I pay for them in cash)

Yesterday, the day before, the day before that

ben duvardan baktım

(I was looking at her from behind the wall)

and I want to come and see you

anasından korkardım

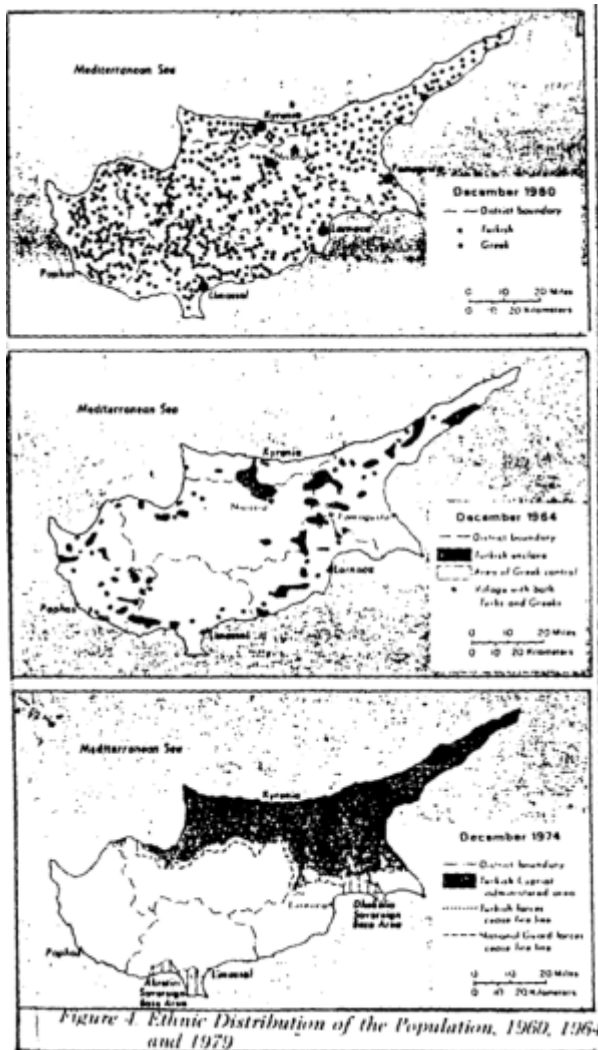
(but I'm afraid of your mother)

CYPRriot FOLK SONG

3.

The structure of the Cypriot dialect, as most researchers have observed, is musico-poetic. It does indeed belong to the tradition of Homer, but Homer (Arabic Umar) does not belong to Athens, the community of antiquity from which the mythology of modern Hellenism draws its symbols.

The poetic-musical tradition historically belongs to the tradition of oral folk expression, whose roots are Central Asian and which experienced a particular [flourishing] in Arab culture. Both Turkey and Cyprus, as well as various marginal regions of Greece, are deeply influenced by this tradition. In its artistic form, this mode of expression begins with poetic quatrains accompanied by a musical instrument (the saz in Turkey, the violin in Cyprus) and extends to love epics [and myths] ("Güzelim", "Destan" [...] "Türkölü-Nikâye" in Turkey, and "Arodafnousa", "The Song of Christofis and Emimes", etc. in Cyprus). This tradition was preserved and developed by the dervishes of the Sufis (the most mystical and, at the same time, Dionysian sect of Islam), by the âşiks of Turkey (âşık, from the Arabic word 'ishq, meaning "love"), and ultimately by the Cypriot piitarides. The Cypriot piitarides did not function simply as wandering âşiks, but also as spoken newspapers for traditional Cypriot communities. The influence of the musicality of this form of communication on the Cypriot dialects is evident. The piitarides, as a social stratum of artists and critics of authority and social customs, essentially disappeared with the modernization of society and the rise of intellectualized nationalist poetry, discourse, and schooling.



LANGUAGE IS BOUND TO PLACE — MAPS OF THE SHRINKING AND DIVISION OF GEOGRAPHICAL SPACE AND CULTURAL PLURALISM FOLLOWING THE RISE OF NATIONALISM.

4.

In their vocabulary, the Cypriot dialects have always been a collage — an uneven collection of words and expressions from cultures stretching from England to Persia. And this is the reappropriation of the colonial experience. Cyprus has always been at the crossroads of empires, always a colony, the appropriation of words and expressions from foreigners is the reconstruction of geographical space through the eroticism of historical experience. We were not simply conquered by the Greeks, the English, the Turks, the Arabs, etc. At night, we took their words (not their language) and fell in love with them, like the freaks of Europe who throw stones and Molotov cocktails at the American embassy to the sounds of ROCK. The openness of a dialect is a sign of the boundaries of evolution and play that it possesses within a global culture. The appropriation of English, Greek, or Turkish expressions is as natural as the fact that we live on the same planet. But the state bureaucracy will take certain words, intellectuals will take others, and those who are oppressed by them will take still others.

5.

Perhaps, for historical reasons, it would be useful to create an alphabet for the Cypriot dialect (writing SH, CH, etc. in Greek letters is, to say the least, ridiculous) for those whose love for language circulates in this galaxy. But in a society structured around authority, the authority of the written word

over the spoken word will always exist. Today, resistance to the “correct language” of authority does not take place only through the resistance (whatever form that resistance may take) of students in schools, but also through the appropriation of new technology. The cassette and video will become the books of an oppressed speech, and the lovers of the airwaves (whether within the framework of “free radio” or not) will become the postmodern piitarides. Only then will the written word become simply erotic, literary, or scientific, without being an instrument of authority — whether the writing is Greek, English, Turkish, Cypriot, or Paphite.

Because this geographical space called Cyprus would be incomplete without the diversity of all its dialects. The words, expressions, and structures of language that we have taken from the empires that have conquered us for 30 centuries are our history. The history of a cultural bridge between East and West. Will the Greeks and Turks of this island ever understand that they too are simply minorities, that this place has room for all of us, and that the other cultural communities on this island (the natives) have grown tired of being spoken to as barbarians and of being used for the passions of their own Oedipal complexes — there is psychoanalysis, after all; tell your mother-states to pay your bills.

[Needs Turkish Translation, Train in the City - Issue 5, Decade 1980-1989, 1988, Limassol, Cypriot dialect](#)

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