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With karagöz puppetry categorized as a UNESCO intangible cultural heritage in 2009, The Ministry of Culture became the only official accreditation for any or all karagöz artists in Turkey. While this has opened a new door for female karagöz artists to earn certificates of proficiency, juries made up mostly of men have made it difficult, if not impossible, for Turkish women to get accredited. This article analyzes the cultural and institutional barriers that women karagöz practitioners face—including precarious encounters with male shadow masters who are determined to keep women out of the field—while highlighting understudied aspects of their points of entry into the profession.

As many women continue to challenge the gender-based gatekeeping culturally framed to be inherent in the tradition, more are slowly but surely entering this cultural heritage field— and no longer just in “backstage” roles.

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Erasure of the Labour of Women in (Gendered) Fields of Heritage

Heritage scholar Laurajane Smith argues that “heritage is gendered, in that it is too often ‘masculine’, and tells a predominantly male-centered story” (2016, 159). My

experience researching Turkish *karagöz* puppetry bears out this argument. In January 2020, during an interview for my dissertation, the resident puppeteer at Bursa's Karagöz Museum told me, in no uncertain terms, that only men can do this job, and that he knowingly disregards the work of women *karagöz* puppeteers. Of the few female *karagöz* puppeteers in the field, even fewer work solo; and only one of them, Sibel Tomaç, consistently performs without a male partner and earns her living primarily through her performances, as a theatre actress and *karagöz* artist. The museum's resident puppeteer expressly targeted Tomaç by name, disqualifying her labor and many years of performances on the basis of her gender. It is telling that this encounter took place in one of the most important institutional fronts of heritage gatekeeping for *karagöz* nationwide. Once again quoting Smith, I was reminded that "Heritage [...] is gendered in the way that heritage is defined, understood and talked about and, in turn, in the way it reproduces and legitimizes gender identities and social values that underpin them" (2016, 161).

Similarly, in her introduction to *Women in Asian Performance: Aesthetics and Politics*, Arya Madhavan argues that the Western feminist critique around the "absence" of women in performance is inadequate in Asia. She suggests the term "erasure" instead: "Absence indicates the non-existence, while erasure signifies a traceable past of 'her' presence, a possibility, a hope of existence and a historical 'trace'" (Madhavan 2017, 8).^[1] The more I delve into details of the history of *karagöz* and the ethnography of its present-day iterations, the more I am exposed to women practitioners in every aspect of the form who have been carefully erased (Başar 2025).^[2] Today, despite the fact that some male *karagöz* artists train women puppeteers, institutionally and culturally it is still very difficult for female artists to have the same potency in the field as their male counterparts. Nonetheless, women have found ways to enter the field, and some important shifts are taking place.

Some women in Turkey have used a strategy similar to their counterparts in Bali (Goodlander 2012, 67): to become puppeteers via the respectable path of academia, integrating their art into their graduate studies, research, and teaching (Başar 2025).

For this reason, in my first publication on women *karagöz* puppeteers in Turkey, I noted that:

Though women still face barriers to their participation in their *karagöz* field, there are four hopeful insights into how things will proceed in the near future. There is *new academic research by female scholars*, new play development by female writers, new award mechanisms that acknowledge the works of women *karagöz* puppeteers, along with new forms of master-apprentice relationships, which collectively challenge the sexism of the field from all fronts. (Başar 2025; emphasis added)

In this article, I focused on the cultural and institutional barriers that keep women out of the profession, along with presenting some of the paths of entry that women practitioners have created for themselves. Due to the lack of institutional training options in *karagöz*, women *karagöz* puppeteers all have unique stories of how they started their practices (see Başar 2025). In male-dominated Balinese *wayang kulit* shadow puppetry, women were brought into this form by men who wanted to show social progress by introducing women *dalangs* (*wayang* masters) into the field. They did this by creating institutional routes for women to enter the field, no matter the limitations of this path (Goodlander 2012, 57) ^[3]. In Turkey, however, there are no formal educational options for training in *karagöz*. This is a major problem that aids in sustaining patriarchal gatekeeping of the medium. The form holds a certain cultural power, especially when tied to heritage discourses that inform the access to institutional funding and support mechanisms (Başar 2025).

Cultural Front: Face-to-face Encounters with Machismo and Misogyny

In the context of Balinese traditional performances, Catherine Diamond writes that “the

most astute performers note that the greatest difficulty is overcoming their own lack of confidence, for, unlike the boys, they have not been encouraged to learn the traits both necessary for the roles and counter to feminine decorum” (2008, 247). In contemporary Turkey, the general exclusion of women from the field of karagöz puppeteering goes beyond discouragement. It occurs by not teaching the craft to women and by actively bullying women who make *karagöz* puppets and who attempt to perform outside of the solidarity networks of ensembles (such as Tiyatro Merdiven [Staircase Theatre], established in 1990s by *karagöz* master Alpay Ekler; see: Başar 2025). Refusing to share information and knowledge is a classic tactic of exclusion. Hilal Polat, a woman puppet artist who has, on occasion, created innovative *karagöz*-style puppets for her experimental theatre collaborations, defined this as a significant problem (Polat, December 19, 2019). Similarly, when karagöz puppet maker Emine Gül Civelek was asked how she relates to other male *karagöz* artists, she stated many difficulties connecting with them. For example, many male artists did not respond to her when she tried to make contact, even when they live in the same city (İzmir, in this case). Additionally, she shared several gender-related discriminatory encounters she experienced after I had closed the recording device used to interview her (Civelek, January 19, 2020).

The tactics used to steer women away from the field begin with disengagement and disregard, as Civelek notes, but then broaden into ridicule and disrespect. Polat mentioned a fellow woman artist who was bullied out of the field by the master she was trying to learn from, noting that this is typically the case in *karagöz*, but not for other forms of non-traditional puppetry in Turkey. Indeed, the *karagöz* master in this particular story had been praised by several of my other interviewees for sharing technical information on *karagöz* puppetry with a male-female duo performance team, and for praising the work of an emerging woman puppet artist who was working in forms other than *karagöz*. Polat explained that this is because all other forms—hand puppets, wearable puppets, marionettes—are viewed as “doll-making,” therefore suitable for women (Polat, December 19, 2019). Women working in those other puppetry arts do not threaten male *karagöz* artists and their cultural hegemony.

In addition, this example demonstrates how the relationality of male *karagöz* puppeteers changes when they meet a woman artist with a male collaborative partner. The presence of the male partner acts a shield for the female collaborator, as open disrespect would also imply disrespect of the male member of the team. In many other instances, male partners indirectly through their presence, simply by virtue of being male, protect female *karagöz* practitioners from direct sexism.

In such male-female co-partnerships, however, the male *karagöz* artists *almost* always overshadow the female partner, despite the male individual's level of commitment to anti-sexism. This is due to the socio-cultural perception of a male-female *karagöz* duo. *Karagöz* performer Göher Ergun explains how, whenever her husband, Enis Ergun, accompanies her to perform *karagöz*, most people assume that her husband does all of the work.^[4] On the other hand, when she gives a performance with another woman artist as her assistant, many of the audience members, mostly children—indoctrinated by cultural bias—insist on knowing where the male artist is (Ergun, January 12, 2020). Tomaç talks openly about the hardships she faces in comparison to women *karagöz* puppeteers who work with a male partner, since gendered cultural hegemony works in insidious ways. In one case her complaints about sexism during an event that was organized by Eyüp Municipality were countered by another woman *karagöz* artist who is protected by a male *karagöz* master. The other artist's comments invalidated Tomaç's lived experience. Tomaç reported that in municipalities where she performs, municipal officials generally take her male apprentice as the principal performer, and in some cases even going so far as to not shake her hand in greeting (Tomaç, December 25, 2019). This is quite an extreme gesture of gender-based rejection for the public culture of Turkey today, even for the communities with more Islamic sensibilities.

Another method of blocking women *karagöz* practitioners, especially for newcomers to the field, is by limiting their access to puppet-making materials. In 2019, when working for Nilüfer City Theatre's *karagöz*-themed theatre production in Bursa, *Hayali'nin Hayali* (Shadow Puppeteer's Dream),^[5] Candan Seda Balaban and her female assistants faced a direct case of sexism. When Balaban's assistants were trying to buy leather from a

karagöz puppeteer's studio, the male *karagöz* master who owns the studio insulted the two women, declaring that women-like them-cannot make *karagöz* puppets. After insistently asking who will make the puppets, he was informed that the designer of the play and maker of the puppets was also a woman, after which he harshly questioned Balaban's capabilities despite not knowing her work. When he was finally convinced to sell the leather, he made a point of giving them the worst leather possible, thick and uneven. Despite these impediments, Balaban successfully made her puppets from these hard-fought-for materials (Balaban, February 4, 2020).

A general tendency towards machismo has also influenced the environment of UNIMA Turkey, the Turkish center of the international puppetry organization. Unfortunately, this has made many women puppeteers hesitant to join UNIMA. Çağrı Yılmaz talked about the atmosphere of an earlier period of UNIMA Turkey, back in the early 2000s, as a place crowded with *karagöz* puppeteers who were religious-conservative, ethno-nationalist, and deeply sexist. Balaban also recounted a similar experience, which lead her to withdraw from UNIMA. Because of the persistent misogyny within *karagöz*, Yılmaz regretfully opines that, although she knows how to craft leather *karagöz* puppets, she has never desired to pursue this art (Yılmaz, November 27, 2019).

Yılmaz also shared that, over the years, UNIMA Turkey has opened up to other forms of puppetry—and that there are notable exceptions of male *karagöz* puppeteers who support their female colleagues. She mentions *karagöz* puppeteer Cengiz Özek as an artist who brought a different sensibility to the tradition. As the organizer of the Istanbul Puppet Festival, he has welcomed women artists, although his more innovative approach to the medium has earned him the cold shoulder from other *karagöz* puppeteers. Halide Oya Tansı also discussed the support she received from Özek, who invited her to showcase her own work in an independent shadow play for the Istanbul Puppet Festival in 2015 (Tansı, December 24, 2019).

Institutional Fronts: Negotiations with Gendered Heritage Gatekeeping

The nature of the sexist encounters described above are echoed in the state-level institutional blocks women face in their search for recognition as culture bearers. Active since 2009, the Ministry of Culture’s gatekeeping through the “bearer of intangible cultural heritage” certification system is partially responsible for further marginalizing women’s presence in the field. The most significant institutional-level sexism involves the Ministry of Culture’s insistence on not giving women *karagöz* puppeteers the UNESCO-related license for “Practitioner of Intangible Cultural Heritage” (*Somut Olmayan*, n.d.), which would allow them to benefit from the resources to which many male *karagöz* puppeteers have access.

It is crucial to note that there are two classifications for this license. One is the “Practitioner of Intangible Cultural Heritage” license for the *making* of *karagöz* puppets. A few women have received this license, including Göher Ergun and Merve İlken in 2019, and Emine Bilgin Canuz in 2023.^[6] To date, however, only one woman has received a license for *performing* *karagöz*—Dr Nazlı Ümit Miraç, who was granted one in 2023 ^[7]. In general, more women puppeteers are granted licenses for puppet making outside of *karagöz*. Tomaç earned a license in 2013 as a “Practitioner of Intangible Cultural Heritage,” but only in traditional *orta oyunu* performance and general (non-*karagöz*) puppet making.^[8] Ergun described her experience facing sexist reviews from the Ministry of Culture jury, where she sees that being a woman immediately disqualifies a candidate. She shared some of the reasons the jury has provided for rejecting women—including that a performer’s voice does not sufficiently work within the medium, or the performer’s lack of concentration. Interestingly, the Ministry of Culture sometimes invites Ergun and her husband to their festivals to perform yet does not document her skills officially by granting her a license as *karagöz* performer (Göher Ergun, January 12, 2020).

Tomaç's experience is similar to Göher Ergun's. As mentioned above, in 2013 she took the "carrier of intangible cultural heritage" performance exam to get into the cataloging system as both a *karagöz puppet* maker and performer. The jury immediately explained to her that she cannot do the voices of *karagöz* characters because she is a woman. Tomaç challenged the jury and defended her artistic choices. In the end, the jury did give her a card, but only as a puppet maker, and without the specialization in *karagöz*, informing her that she was too inexperienced as an animator of puppets. Interestingly, the jury gave her an *orta oyunu* performing license—explaining to her that this was the first time a woman had been granted one—but not one for *karagöz* performance (Tomaç, December 25, 2019). I found the feedback Tomaç received from the 2013 jury especially interesting, as it reflects Ergun's experience that juries consider women artists, by definition of being female, not good enough—even those with impressive accomplishments. The jury told Tomaç that one of her major mistakes was that her puppet characters Karagöz and Hacivat were too distant from each other. This is not a valid criticism because, for each *karagöz* puppeteer, the distance between these two puppets, when they are doing one of their famous verbal quarrels, is determined by the width of that individual's body. This de facto defines where the upper arms rest on the sides of the torso to comfortably and naturally hold the puppets in longer scenes where the focus is on the voice (Tomaç, December 25, 2019).

On the other hand, Tomaç has also experienced some rare instances of "desk clerk law," when mid or low-level officials use their own initiatives to support her work. One such case took place when she was invited to Bursa Puppet Festival after a woman jury member took the initiative to include her.^[9] Despite this particular jury member's efforts, Tomaç was not invited as a *karagöz* puppeteer, only as an observer (Tomaç, December 25, 2019). In another example, Tomaç describes one positive experience when, for the first time, she applied to the Ministry of Culture for funding. She went in person to submit her application because it was the last day before the deadline, which gave her the opportunity to talk to one of the officials and explain who she was and what she does. The official told her she would receive the funding in October. She was doubtful, as the Ministry of Culture generally gives out funding in November or December, and

mostly to applicants who have applied previously. When what the official said turned out to be true, Tomaç understood that the officer wanted to actively support the work of a woman performing *karagöz* alone (Tomaç, December 25, 2019).

Tomaç finds that municipalities generally operate in this ambiguous realm, where each official's opinions influence the decision of how much Tomaç, as a woman *karagöz* puppeteer, can work with the institution. On one occasion, she tried to sell her *karagöz* performance to municipal festivals in Istanbul, recalling a positive conversation with a Küçükçekmece district organization's manager, who said they would take her performance for the upcoming season. Later when she checked with another representative to book the dates, she overheard the manager in the background, who told the representative that he should make up an excuse to dismiss her, such as saying that the cultural center is under construction, since it is impossible to have a woman *karagöz* puppeteer perform. The representative was so ashamed that Tomaç had overheard the conversation that he ended up booking another one of her works, but not her *karagöz* play (Tomaç, December 25, 2019).

Tomaç was extremely open in sharing her stories, as she wanted to ensure that these experiences were documented. One stood out as an illustration of sexism at the highest level of the state. In 2014, the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality planned to have its first major Ramadan celebration modeled on Ottoman Ramadan celebrations^[10]. Being the first of its kind in Yenikapı activity space, the festival must not have had to go through a rigorous elimination process in choosing the entertainments, as Tomaç was accepted as a woman *karagöz* puppeteer. On the day that then-Prime Minister, now-President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, planned to visit the activity space, one of the officials asked Tomaç if her male apprentice could perform instead of her for that night. When she declined the offensive proposal, officers found a way to make sure Erdoğan did not visit Tomaç's stand^[11]. The following year, she was not accepted to perform her *karagöz* (Tomaç, December 25, 2019).

The ambiguous status of women *karagöz* puppeteers vis-à-vis state institutions has

been problematic for all my interviewees. For example, puppeteer Halide Oya Tansı, while working with her artistic collaborator and husband, Arif Duygu Tansı (he passed away in June 2020), recalls many experiences of being asked to not be visible, despite being an integral part of the performance. She rejected such clearly gender-biased proposals (Tansı, December 24, 2019). While I have shown clear expressions of sexism and misogyny in the field, we've also seen examples in which mid-level administrators can be supportive. Such paradoxes and ambiguities about how and to whom the institutions provide cultural access is essential in understanding and celebrating the many women *karagöz* artists who eventually enter the field after countless refusals and persistent misogyny.

Pioneers like Tomaç are making important strides as they pave the way for the future of the medium and have even been able to speak to gender biases and sexism through their own grassroots feminist *karagöz* productions. Ergun recalled Tomaç's play *Karagöz, The Matchmaker*, ^[12] an adaptation of popular Turkish marriage reality shows that targeted women viewers, and housewives in particular. She compared it to past *karagöz* master Tacettin Diker's ^[13] play, *Karagöz, The Soccer Referee*, which mocked sports culture, considered primarily a masculine pastime (Göher Ergun, January 12, 2020). It is noteworthy that drawing on contemporary themes is as prominent in the current "invented" ^[14] post-1930s Republican *karagöz* tradition as it was during the earlier Ottoman tradition ^[15]. Tomaç, however, is probably the first person to embrace a grassroots feminist perspective. In her play, the character Karagöz has an argument with his wife, leaves home and falls asleep on the street, only to wake up to find himself turned into a woman. He then experiences harassment, sexual assault, and labor discrimination. He becomes enlightened about women's lives and their struggles and ends up apologizing to his wife (Tomaç, December 25, 2019). Having Karagöz dressed as a woman and being transformed physically is a common comedic trope dating back to the Ottoman period. But as far as my research shows, it was never used before to express a grassroots feminist consciousness. Creating a play where the character Karagöz experiences the difficulties faced by a woman living in a sexist world represents

a big step forward in a medium that is defined by its historical, cultural and institutional masculine gatekeeping.

Flexible Fronts of Entry: Writing for *Karagöz* as Backstage Work

It might seem counterintuitive for someone trained in Western drama to view playwriting as a second-rank job in the cultural hierarchy of performance creation. But as *karagöz* represents an oral tradition that has been transmitted through embodied practices of master-apprentice relationships for centuries, writing for *karagöz* is actually a modern phenomenon. Today's masters write their own texts when they are devising a new performance, but I have never witnessed a case in which a *karagöz* master searches for a new text the way a director or ensemble does for a play text. Therefore, writing for the medium of *karagöz* without being a performer or being part of a *karagöz* ensemble means one's play will have very little chance of being performed. Since playwriting does not directly confront the cultural patriarchy of gendered heritage, it is usually perceived as a secondary job, literally *backstage* work. Many women write for *karagöz*, keen to participate in any opportunity that arises, even if it does not lead to a performance—for example, through entering national *karagöz* playwriting contests. This can be understood as a flexible entry point to the medium.

Based on my findings, women writing for *karagöz* became a phenomenon worthy of documentation thanks to a 2012 national contest. To celebrate the city's claim to fame as the mythological place where the characters Karagöz and Hacivat originated, the Bursa Metropolitan Municipality opened a nationwide *karagöz* scriptwriting contest^[16]. The contest offered prize money, along with a promise to publish award-winning texts. It received a record number of 107 submissions, of which 101 were officially accepted. (Others were incorrectly formatted according to the specifications of the contest.)^[17] The jury consisted of established theatre scholar Dr. Özdemir Nutku (1931–2019), UNIMA Turkey National Center President, Mevlüt Özhan (b. 1953), Head of the Performing Arts

Department in the Faculty of Fine Arts of Uludağ University (located in Bursa), Dr. Nurhan Tekerek (b. 1959), Bursa Metropolitan Municipality Culture and Arts Advisor, Ahmet Erdönmez (b. 1949), along with *karagöz* artist and independent researcher, Ünver Oral (b. 1937). The secretariat of the contest was the Metropolitan Municipality City Theatre Artistic Director, Ertan Akman (b. 1963), who was not officially part of the selection committee.

It's important to call out Prof. Dr. Nurhan Tekerek as the only woman on the five-person jury, as well as one of the youngest members. It would be correct to assume that she was included for her academic achievements, including many publications on traditional Turkish performances. Moreover, Tekerek was also performing as a woman *meda dah* (traditional storyteller, see Çakmak 2013) at the time of the contest, groundbreaking itself in terms of the gender-biased nature of heritage performances.^[18]

Among the six award-winning plays, second place was given to a woman writer, Rahime Atasaray, for her play, *Karagöz is Looking for a Job*.^[19] But the success of women writers in the contest does not end there. Ünver Oral took the initiative to go through the plays that did not win and, from these works, published three new volumes of *karagöz* plays. In the first volume (2014), five out of thirteen authors are women: Miyase Sertbarut Bağcı, Zeynep Erdal, Feraye Şahin, Şenay Paşa, and Emel Dilsever. In the second volume (2014), there are three women out of sixteen authors—Kader Ataç, Vesile Bayrak Sak, and Duygu Yılmaz. And there are five out of nineteen in the third volume (2018)—Şükran Çiftçi, Ayla Abak, Nazlı Miraç Ümit, Ayfer Adanır, and Sibel Tomaç.^[20] These figures amount to one high-ranking prize for a female writer out of six prizes in total, and thirteen female writers out of forty-eight published authors from one single playwriting contest. The fact that fourteen of the fifty-four accomplished participants of the 2012 contest were women was unexpected, to say the least—and seems to indicate more positive change ahead.^[21]

As the 2012 *karagöz* scriptwriting contest shows, it is more likely for the male

establishment to acknowledge women artists' contributions within *karagöz* in impersonal, merit-based, behind-the-scenes circumstances. However, it is more challenging for the male establishment to acknowledge women's labor in actual performances on the *karagöz* screen, where they naturally would be more aware of the presence of women artists. Yet women's writing for *karagöz* demonstrates another key indicator of resilience: It produces an accumulation of documents regarding women's presence in the medium for future reference. This is very important, considering that the gatekeeping of *karagöz* is strongly based on the gendered historiography of the medium (see Başar 2025). Therefore, by countering the local, practice-based patriarchy with a Western-centric, global, intellectual patriarchy that sees the text and documentation as the superior element of performance, emerging women practitioners ingeniously make space for themselves.

The overall situation of performance practice is slowly changing as well, thanks to active women artists like Tomaç, Ergün, and Dr. Nazlı Miraç Ümit. At the 6th İstanbul *Karagöz* Festival Awards, held in November 2022, the *Tacettin Diker Special Award* was given to Ergün. Tomaç and Ergün were among the *karagöz* artists who performed at the ceremony. Four women researchers and artists—Ümit, Azime Handan Delipınar, Gonca Ceylan, and Tomaç—gave talks during the festival, while Tomaç, as President of the Karagöz Association's Head of the Board, told the press that they would hold the Karagöz Festival in different cities over the following years. This would, in effect, showcase the presence of women *karagöz* puppeteers across Turkey. This pioneering generation of women artists, now in their 40s, also are taking initiatives to honor the labor of the previous generation of women *karagöz* puppet makers and performers. At the same festival, Meserret Oral,^[22] a member of the older generation of female *karagöz* performers, who was dismissed for decades as only the wife of *karagöz* puppeteer Ünver Oral, received a lifetime achievement award ("6. İstanbul Karagöz," November 30, 2022).

Newly Emerging Gender-Bending Master-Apprentice Relationships

Alpay Ekler (1964–2022), the *karagöz* master and artistic director of the ensemble Tiyatro Merdiven, trained Tomaç, Ergün, and Ümit starting from late 1990s and early 2000s, the beginning of a slowly growing openness to women in traditional master-apprentice relationships.^[23] It is important to highlight that these relationships were formed due to the resilience of women apprentices more than the flexibility of male masters, taking place in environments that were generally not—at least immediately—welcoming or supportive.

Hüseyin Dilan (b. 1982) is another male *karagöz* master from the younger generation who has been supportive of women artists, teaching them about making puppets and performing. He has also worked with many women musicians in his own performances. I attended his production of *İşkirlak Aranıyor* (In Search for an *İşkirlak*)^[24] a work of the *Karagöz Sanat Atölyesi* (Karagöz Arts Studio), at Moda Sahnesi (Moda Stage Theatre) in Istanbul’s Kadıköy neighborhood on May 27, 2023 ^[25], at the invitation of my friend Elif Özen, who was (and still is) working on her PhD in music ethnography and focusing on *karagöz* songs. As part of her research, Özen performs as a soloist in Dilan’s *karagöz* shows. This particular show was remarkable in the versatility and adult nature of its humor, the closest contemporary performance I have seen to the style of Ottoman *karagöz*.^[26] While there were no women puppeteers performing, there were three women involved as prominent members of the music ensemble: besides Özen who sang and played tamborine, the *lavta* (plucked lute) player, Berna Akça, and the classical *kemençe* (bowed lute) player, Ezgi Coşkunpınar.

Dilan created the play in 2018 as a response to public debates around “choosing the new heir of *orta oyunu*,” which began in 2016 and was retriggered in 2020. *Orta oyunu* is a semi-improvised ensemble technique that is similar to *commedia dell’arte* without the use of masks. The genre was mostly abandoned due to fast modernizations in daily

life and new state regulations over performances after the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923. Sharing very similar destinies with the other two urban Ottoman performance forms, *meddah* and *karagöz*, *orta oyunu* has also been a form that is commonly recycled and reimagined by many theatre artists in Turkey. In an “invented” tradition established by late Ottoman *orta oyunu* player Ismail Dümbüllü (1897–1973), the *kavuk*, or performance hat worn by Kavuklu, one of the lead characters of *orta oyunu*, is passed on to the next generation of promising male comedy actors. Dümbüllü inherited the hat from the late Ottoman *orta oyunu* master Kel Hasan Efendi (1874–1921), and it was first officially passed down in front of the press by Dümbüllü to Münir Özkul (1925–2018) in 1968. The tradition continued when Ferhan Şensoy (1951–2021) inherited it in 1989 from Özkul, and finally Rasim Öztekin (1959–2021) from Şensoy in 2016. Each of these events was widely covered by the national press. This passing of the *kavuk*, as well as other performance items inherited from previous generations of male performers to younger performers by Dümbüllü, became a counter-tradition to those of the Republican performing arts institutions.^[27] In 2020, with Öztekin now ready to retire due to illness, there was again a general debate about who would next inherit the much-mediatized *kavuk*. Öztekin decided to pass on the famous *kavuk* to Şevket Çoruh (b. 1973). Dilan’s show was made two years after the first general debates in 2016, around the time Münir Özkul passed away in 2018, reminding the public of these debates. Since the debut of *İşkirlak Aranıyor* (In Search for an *İşkirlak*) in 2018, the *kavuk* was passed onto its current holder (Çoruh), stirring even further debates, including questions around why women comedy performers are not even considered.

The premise of Dilan’s play is that Karagöz is feeling burnt out due to performing for centuries. He wants to pass on his own hat, his *ışkirlak*, to a new character whom Karagöz believes needs to be both critical and humorous at the same time. Among the many characters who create absurd situations, a young woman named Setenay (a Circassian woman’s name in Turkey) comes to “audition” for Karagöz’s *ışkirlak*.^[28] The Setenay puppet was also featured on the cover of UNIMA Turkey’s special magazine

issue No. 8, which focused on women puppeteers. The photo depicts a *karagöz*-style shadow figure of a young, beautiful woman in a matching pink formal coat and mini skirt.^[29] Setenay introduces herself as an actress just graduated from a real-life private university's theatre conservatory. Karagöz feels bad about breaking it to her but informs her that she cannot be the next Karagöz because she is a woman. When Setenay persists and asks, "Can't a woman become Karagöz?" Karagöz answers with a simple, "No, she can't!" To which Setenay answers, "But there are women *karagöz* puppeteers." Karagöz mumbles, unsure, and then responds with, "Yes, we do hear about that." To which the three women musicians sitting at the front row of the little orchestra made of traditional instruments collectively suck their teeth, showing their disapproval of his discourse. Karagöz then says, "Yes, there are women *karagöz* puppeteers, but Karagöz is a man, and this is nothing more than a technique. You as women can create a new tradition and pass it on amongst yourselves."^[30] As a humorous ending, Setenay throws a tantrum, shouting, "What do you mean? Do you say women cannot create a tradition?!" Baffled, Karagöz is left mumbling on the screen, "But that was what I said." In his internal dilemma, Karagöz asks himself, "Have I become a sexist now?" The desire of Karagöz not to "become sexist" is an important nuance, and a relatively new cultural sensibility that is here being reflected on the *karagöz* screen.



Figure 1. *Işkirlak Aranıyor* (In Search for an Işkirlak) performance photo from 23 November 2024 at Sahne Pasaport, at Suadiye, Istanbul. Women members of the little orchestra (Soloist and tambourine player: Elif Özen, Lavta: Berna Akça, Classical kemençe: Ezgi Coşkunpınar, Tanbur: Işıl Meriç Ayata) can be clearly seen here. (Photo credit: Deniz Başar)

At the end of the performance, Dilan honored the women performers in the orchestra in a public act of support. He gifted Özen the tambourine she played during the performance. After acknowledging Akça as the maker of the Karagöz and Hacivat puppets used in the show, Dilan gifted these puppets to her, along with his own *nevregan*—a special knife used in crafting the leather for making *karagöz* puppets—which he had been using for a decade. He also told Akça, “We will gift you more figures if you animate them too.” Acknowledging these women artists’ labor publicly, in front of the audience, demonstrated a significant change in attitude from

previous generations of male *karagöz* masters and players.

After the show, the ensemble went out to tea together and, through Özen's introduction and invitation, I joined the group. While we were sitting, Dilan remembered that he had four extra leather *ışkirlak* figures and gave them to the three women of the team and myself. I teased him saying, "You only gave these to the women!" To which he replied, "Yes. You should start some things too." I responded, "We already did."

New Horizons: Emergence of Woman-Majority *Karagöz* Groups with A New Set of Characters

The field is changing faster today than a decade ago. New experiments are taking shape under special conditions. I will now analyze, in relation to my previous example, one case led by a woman-majority group. Today, working under Dilan's *Karagöz Sanat Atölyesi* (Karagöz Arts Studio), Özen, Akça, and Salih Banazılı (the only male member of the trio) are doing a practice-as-research project to make a female version of the character of Karagöz in their new *karagöz* play, which will debut in 2025. The trio prepared the text for the 2023 Alpay Ekler *Karagöz* Playwriting contest organized by Karagöz Derneği Yayınları (*Karagöz* Foundation Publications).^[31] The play did not earn an award, but it motivated the young artists to write the text that they are now working on. As a team, they are not attempting to "masculinize" the voices of their characters, but rather they are searching for comedic voices for their mostly female cast of characters.

It is important to note the routes by which these newly emerging women *karagöz* artists entered the field in order to understand the significant changes within it. Özen began practicing *karagöz* within the *Genç Karagözcüler* (Young *Karagöz* Artists) Festival, which took place between December 12-17, 2022, organized by Rumeli University and the Ministry of Culture. It was led at the time by Alpay Ekler (Özen, December 2, 2024). Many up-and-coming women artists took part in this program and got to practice performing in front of an audience: İrem Yüm, Saliha Balcı Yörür, Riyana Tufanova,

Özen, and Akça.^[32] The festival also served to help connect women puppeteers to both male and female mentors. Özen watched Ümit's performance and participated in Tomaç's workshop. Özen was placed in Dilan's unit during the festival; and he later invited her and Akça to his studio.

In their play, both Karagöz and Hacıvat appear as female versions of themselves. Significantly, they do not "turn into" women through a supernatural curse only to be converted back to their initial form at the end of the play, as seen in older plays. They just *are* women. While Karagöz's name remains the same, Hacıvat's name has become Hacıvazi. The main characters being woman can be read as a subtle response to Karagöz's suggestion to Setenay (in Dilan's play) to "start a tradition of your own." The plot of the play references a popular news item from 2023, when it was revealed that Dilan Polat, a famous female beauty influencer from Turkey who owns a series of beauty clinics, was laundering money. In the show, Karagöz and Hacıvazi take over a hairdresser's shop while the owner is away. Unbeknownst to them, the shop turns out to be a money laundering business, leaving the duo to deal with a series of interesting characters. Özen, Berna Akça, and Salih Banazılı designed the characters who will go to the hairdresser. These are neighborhood types reimagined from the Ottoman *karagöz*. For example, Bebe Ruhi, the small-sized, mischievous character from the Ottoman-era *karagöz* is reimagined as Ruhiye. Dilan's character, Setenay, has a cameo role as the neighborhood socialite. Such experiments are important because new storylines and new characters created by women-majority teams challenge the patriarchy of the institutions and culturally biased publics in the field of heritage performances in Turkey.

Conclusion

As I have shown, UNESCO's intangible cultural heritage system has inadvertently contributed to institutionalizing sexism within the *karagöz* performance tradition and culture. As Thomas Beardslee notes in his analysis of heritage projects, a system like this "creates something new and intervenes, changing people's relationship to a practice, and indeed to each other. It is a tool that gives those who wield it the power to

shape perceptions of the past, while defining the borders of present-day communities” (2015, 99). Yes, male *karagöz* puppeteers and other experts, including some academics, created a “heritage middle-management” (Beardslee 2015, 89) through the intangible cultural heritage juries in Turkey that has served to maintain the cultural patriarchy of the field. But this new system itself also inadvertently created, for the first time, an official opportunity for women to qualify in the profession, whereas *karagöz* traditionally lacked official routes for teaching, examining, and qualifying newcomers.

Challenging and changing the discourses around *karagöz* as heritage performance is important because, as Laurajane Smith puts it,

Subsequently the contemporary heritage values given to certain gender identities send powerful messages – if women are invisible and devalued in the way they are portrayed through a nation’s heritage, this will reinforce the contemporary values and inequalities given to women’s identities, social roles and experiences. (2016, 163)

Jennifer Goodlander, in studying Balinese *wayang kulit* shadow puppetry, notes that interventions made by women practitioners into traditional forms protected by staunchly patriarchal gatekeepers are “described as often political (feminist) in intent, if not by the artists themselves then by the scholars describing the phenomenon” (Goodlander 2019, 72). This, Goodlander adds, might be the scholars’ wishful thinking more than the reality. Goodlander suggests that “women performers in an all-male tradition[s], such as *wayang kulit*, are subject to the same complex structures of society governing both gender and performance” (2019, 72–73), therefore their interventions take form through ambiguous alliances and carefully managed discourses (Goodlander 2012, 67).

The case with *karagöz* puppetry in Turkey is very similar. A range of negotiations, ambiguous alliances, and paradoxical cultural and institutional approaches exist that

sometimes deliberately exclude women and, at other times, support them. As one of the “scholars describing the phenomenon” (Goodlander 2019, 72), I am also inclined to write in ways that document, organize, and eventually defend the collective labour of women who try to enter and stay in the *karagöz* field. My research projects a promising, more inclusive future for women in the *karagöz* tradition. Women’s labor can be seen today especially through the productive cultural ambiguity of writing for *karagöz*, new master-apprentice relationships, increasing numbers of certified women *karagöz* puppet makers and performers, and through the emergence of woman-majority *karagöz* ensembles.

Notes

^[1] A similar argument can be made for Chinese shadow puppetry, based on Annie Rollins’ PhD research. Rollins notes that “[w]hile the majority of practicing shadow puppet artists in China today are men, due to a ban on women practitioners through the Ming and Qing Dynasty, there were women practitioners in the urban centers during the Song dynasty and likely in the more remote areas throughout the form’s long history” (Rollins 2019, 17, footnote 20). Rollins also notes an important woman practitioner from the 1920s in Beijing, Pauline Benton, the first American artist and practitioner, who founded her own Red Gate Players Chinese shadow puppet company in the US after her short apprenticeship under master Li Tuochen (Rollins 2019, 57). During her field research and apprenticeship, Rollins was also helped by her “puppet making and performance master Wei Jinquan and his most accomplished apprentice, Wangyan, who was a rarity in the craft as a young woman” (Rollins 2019, 26). Another example is noted within the context of the Longzaitian shadow puppet troupe (active since 2008), which is made by an ensemble of little people, and Rollins notes that Liu Weiwei is “a smart young woman” who was a part of the troupe (Rollins 2019, 123).

^[2] For example, whereas traditionally *wayang kulit* performances rarely had female audiences (Goodlander 2016, 138–139), historically, *karagöz* almost always had women

spectators. During the last four hundred years of the Ottoman period (circa 1550 to 1922) there were performances made exclusively for women, or women watched performances in a segregated area, where they could see the same screen as the men, no matter how raunchy the performance was (Başar 2021).

^[3] Since the mid-1970s, formal higher education institutions were established around *wayang kulit*, which made it possible for woman to learn the craft outside of traditional bounds of patriarchy (Goodlander 2016, 139). Goodlander notes these institutions as follows: “Institut Seni Indonesia (ISI, Indonesian Institute for the Arts) offers S1 and S2 (BA and MA degrees) in puppetry, dance, theater, and music. Previously it was the Akademi Seni Tari Indonesia (ASTI, Indonesian Academy of the Arts) and then the Sekolah Tinggi Seni Indonesia (STSI, Indonesian University of the Arts). The Sekolah Menengah Karawitan Indonesia (SMKI, Indonesian High School for the Arts) previously was known as the Akademi Seni Karawitan Indonesia (KOKAR, Indonesian Conservatory for the Arts)” (Goodlander 2016, 183; endnote 5). According to Goodlander, despite the progressive efforts to bring women into the medium of *wayang kulit*, there was a limit to this institutional inclusion. Women’s work remained strictly limited within the realms of secular performances, claiming that women *dalangs* should receive extra training, outside of their formal training, if they want to do ritual performances as well.

^[4] Göher Ergun and Enis Ergun established Gülhane Shadow Puppet Theatre, and later were part of the collective who founded the *Karagöz* Association in 2017. In 2013 both of them were documented as Carriers of Material Tradition as *karagöz* puppet makers by the Ministry of Culture (Göher Ergun, January 12, 2020).

^[5] See Başar 2021, 290–321, for more information on the play *Shadow Puppeteer’s Dream*.

^[6] Emine Bilgin Canuz has a “Practitioner of Intangible Cultural Heritage” license for the *making* of not only *karagöz* puppets but also *İbiş* puppets, which is a hand puppet

tradition from nineteenth-century İstanbul. Canuz also has a “Practitioner of Intangible Cultural Heritage” license for animating *İbiş* puppets. I find it interesting that Canuz did not enter the animation exams of *karagöz* at all. I would argue that the decision not to take the exam might also be due to the unspoken but strong patriarchal nature of the field.

^[7] See the explanation of the video documentation at Ümit 2024.

^[8] A form that is regularly called Ottoman *commedia dell’arte*. The main difference is that *orta oyunu* does not use masks and women were performed by men.

^[9] Based on my field study, I can speculate that this woman jury member might have been Professor Nurhan Tekerek.

^[10] *Karagöz* is traditionally closely associated with Ramadan. After breaking the fast people would gather for performances in coffee houses. This is also why a traditional Ottoman *karagöz* master had to have at least 28-30 performances in his repertoire, to correspond to every night of Ramadan.

^[11] Perhaps the officers were nervous that Erdoğan, as a political leader with a strong religious-conservative and nationalist stance, might need to be shielded from seemingly supporting innovations in Ottoman traditions, such as indirectly supporting women *karagöz* puppeteers performing in a state-supported Ramadan event. Their estimation is quite likely to be true, but if this encounter had actually happened, there is a small possibility that it could have been okay. Because Erdoğan’s Neo-Ottomanist cultural revival projects have continuously presented many ambiguities and shifts from year to year since 2002, since he came to power. Since Erdoğan’s Neo-Ottomanist cultural revival project was never coherent, it selectively but continuously endorsed women professionals in unlikely fields on the basis of the political support of the particular professional.

^[12] For the script of this play, see: Tomaç, Sibel. 2018. “Karagöz Çöpçatan [Karagöz, the ;Matchmaker].” *Bilgilerle Günümüzden Karagöz Oyunları 3* [Karagöz Plays from Today with Explanations 3], compiled by Ünver Oral, ed. by Ünver Oral, 315–332. Istanbul: KİTAPEVİ.

* This play was initially titled *Karagöz Hanım Teyze* [Mrs. Karagöz Aunt] when it was performed in 2015. It was renamed *Karagöz Çöpçatan* [Karagöz, the Matchmaker] around 2018. In 2019, it was renamed again as *Karagöz, Zenne* [Karagöz, The Woman].

^[13] See Nicolas, 2009.

^[14] This framework of an “invented” *karagöz* tradition is defined in reference to Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger’s seminal work from 1983, *The Invention of Tradition*. See: Efe 2013 and Başar 2021, 93-119.

^[15] See Öztürk, 2006 and Başar, 2021, 93-119.

^[16] To summarize the Bursa myth, see the following quote from Başar, 2021, 78-79:

An important folk assumption about the “origins” of Karagöz is a largely circulated folk tale documented for the first time by Evliya Çelebi, one of the most important travel writers and cultural commentators of the seventeenth century Ottoman Empire. Evliya Çelebi suggests that Karagöz was developed by the Turks in early Ottoman times when Bursa was still the capital (1326-1365). In the folk culture of Bursa, as is generally known and widely accepted legend in Turkey, Karagöz and Hacıvat were actual people who were working on the construction of Ulucami Mosque, which was built for Orhan Gazi (b.1281-d.1362) during his reign between 1323 and 1362. Because they were making everyone laugh all the time, the construction of the mosque was delayed, and Orhan Gazi executed them simply because of that. Later, Orhan Gazi regretted his decision. To comfort Orhan Gazi’s consciousness and to immortalize the memory of

Karagöz and Hacivat, Şeyh Küşteri made them into shadow puppets. In another version of this myth, the ruler of the time is Yıldırım Beyazıd. Ezel Akay's 2006 movie, *Killing the Shadows*, which was a commercial success, is based on this well-known folk legend of Bursa. Evliya Çelebi wrote this myth about the identities of Karagöz and Hacivat in Bursa as follows:

Karagöz was İstanbul *tekmur* (name of the Christian rulers in Seljuk and Ottoman period) Constantine's stableman. He was living close to Edirne (Kırk Kilise) and he was a kıpti (Christian gypsy). His name was called Soyfozlu Karagöz Bali Çelebi. Tekfur Constantine sent once a year to Alaeddin of Seljuk [this] Karagöz so his arguments and quarrels with Hacivat can be put on the shadow screen by that period's performers. [...] Hacıyvat is Hacı İvaz from Bursa. At the time of Seljuks he was known as Yorkça Halil and was Muslim.

^[17] From these 107 plays, 27 of them were from Bursa, which highlights how much the city's identity is grounded in the myth of the origin of Karagöz and Hacivat. Other than Bursa, the contest received submissions from a number of cities: Ankara, İstanbul, İzmir, Kocaeli, Ordu, Yalova, Sakarya, Ağrı, Erzurum, Konya, Mersin, Samsun, Gaziantep, Malatya, Kayseri, Eskişehir, Amasya, Adana, Akşehir, Balıkesir, Antalya, and even from the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. The enthusiasm documented through the number of applications to this contest specializing in writing new *karagöz* scripts is an interesting phenomenon since the number is comparable to the submissions of regular playwriting contests in Turkey. This contrasts the on-going discourse of the "death of *karagöz*" as a medium (see Başar 2021, 25–47), repeatedly appearing both in Turkish and global theatre/performance studies literature.

^[18] *Meddah* is a storytelling performance from Ottoman times. The word *meddah* refers to both the storyteller and the medium itself. *Meddahs* used only two props, a stick and a handkerchief, to give life to many characters as they narrated their stories. In İstanbul, between the 1600s and 1900s, there were many *meddah* performances in coffee shops, where the *meddahs* performed for the male clientele. *Meddah* performers

were closely tied to two other significant Ottoman urban, non-religious and comedic performance genres, namely *karagöz* and *orta oyunu*. Nurhan Tekerek performed as a woman *meddah* between 2011 and 2013, performing both in cafes and theatre spaces. Tekerek's *meddah* text, *Zilli Şih* [Sirdar with Bells], was written by Haşmet Zeybek, who is known for his plays that synthesize traditional performance forms with Western drama (Çakmak 2013). Nurhan Tekerek also worked on this play for her PhD thesis, in which she traced the elements of the traditional Ottoman performances in contemporary play texts (Tekerek 2000). This means that her *Zilli Şih* performance can be read as a practice-as-research project that spanned more than a decade (also see: Tekerek 2004). Lastly, Nurhan Tekerek's performance was included in a Ministry of Culture's UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage repertory DVD set in 2011 made for *meddah*, where she was the only woman performer amongst seven performances that were recorded between the 1960s and 2010s ("'Meddahlık' Unutulmadı", October 26, 2011).

^[19] Information about the contest is summarized from two news articles, "Karagöz ve Hacivat'a Yeni Replikler Aranıyor," January 24, 2012, and "Gölge Oyununun Yeni Replikleri Kocaeli'nden," December 10, 2012 and January 2013.

^[20] The titles of these women's plays, with their English translations, can be found in the bibliography under their names.

^[21] Additionally, Sibel Tomaç's *Karagöz, the Matchmaker* is included in the third volume along with *karagöz* researcher and animator, Dr. Nazlı Miraç Ümit's play *European Comes, How Nicely He Comes* (the title involves a pun in Turkish based on a folk song). Ümit's play can also be seen as a practice-as-research project, since one of her developing research topics on *karagöz* is based on the development of the Frenk stereotype. ("Frenk" is a word that comes from a distortion of the word *French*, which has become a generic term for the European stereotype in *karagöz* during the nineteenth century.)

^[22] For more about Meserret Oral, see Başar 2025.

^[23] For more information about Tiyatro Merdiven, see Başar 2025.

^[24] *İşkirlak* is Karagöz's hat.

^[25] *İşkirlak Aranıyor*. 27 May 2023. Moda Sahnesi, Istanbul. Live *karagöz* performance.

Name of the ensemble: KARAGÖZ SANAT ATÖLYESİ [Karagöz Art Studio], Playwright and Master Karagöz Puppeteer: Hüseyin Dilan, Apprentice [Yardak]: Eray Sel, Soloist [Hanende]: Elif Özen, Lavta: Berna Akça, Classical Kemençe: Ezgi Coşkunpınar, Bağlama: Şahin Karabıyık – Baran Peyman, Gitar: Civan Peyman. First performed in 2018.

^[26] There were contemporary political jokes in the play that reflected the immediate intensity of the audiences about the upcoming election day (which took place on 28 May 2023), along with jokes that teased other prominent *karagöz* performers in the field. Additionally, there were many self-reflexive jokes in the play, that played into the metatheatrical fashion of traditional *karagöz* performances. For example, when the Kurdish character comes onto the stage and asks for Karagöz's *ışkirlak* and gets refused, the Kurdish character protests by saying that this is due to Karagöz's racism. In return, Karagöz tells him that his own animator is indeed Kurdish, referring to Hüseyin Dilan himself, so it really cannot be the case (Dilan 2023). Earlier, I briefly wrote about the self-reflexive humor of this show in a larger context; see: Başar 2021, 424.

^[27] For a detailed account of these public debates, see: Başar 2021, 201–210 and 442–446.

^[28] I got to watch this performance for a second time on 23 November 2024 at Sahne Pasaport, at Suadiye, Istanbul. In this second watch, Setenay's surname was mentioned

for the first time, too—*Karabiber*—which means black pepper. Circassian women are commonly referred to as beautiful in Turkey due to their Slavic heritage, culturally imagined as tall, slim and lighter colored (blond or brunette) since late Ottoman times, and Setenay puppet represented this cultural image. The fact that Setenay is Circassian also serves the purpose of representing many ethnic stereotypes on the *karagöz* stage as it used to be in the Ottoman *karagöz*.

^[29] See: *Woman Puppeteers*, November 8, 2021.

^[30] Puppet artist Candan Seda Balaban offered the same suggestion in our interview also (Balaban, February 4, 2020). Catharine Diamond offers a parallel proposal for women in Balinese traditions too, : “[Within traditional forms women practitioners] are still working within male constructed parameters. Until they start creating their own characters, carving the masks for those new characters, adding their own forms of presentation to the artistic canon, and writing their own musical compositions, their participation and representation remains circumscribed.” (Diamond 2008, 264)

^[31] See: “Karagöz Yarışması [Alpay Ekler Anısına]”, 2023.

^[32] See: “Genç Karagözcüler,” 2022.

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