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Why is Uncle Paintbrush so funny?
The case of YouTube translation of a Syrian Kurdish wedding song into Finnish

On 23 August 2009 YouTube user TheKassitus released the video Mihemmed – Niilin hanhet (‘The Geese of Nile’), which quickly became an Internet hit – or a ‘meme’ – in Finland, as by the end of November 2009 it had been viewed already 1.7 million times and by May 2010 nearly 2.5 million times. Roughly two years after the release, the viewer count was a little over 2.7 million, which indicates that the general interest towards the clip had settled down. Currently, in early 2013 that is, the count indicates a little shy of 2.9 million views.

In the video, Syrian Kurd musician Ebdo Mihemed performs a Kurdish folk song Pinsedî Zêde (‘Five Hundred More’), backed up by a group of musicians. The performance alone would hardly make the video stand out from the plethora of YouTube productions, but there is one thing that makes it intriguing for the Finnish-speaking audience: it has been subtitled, or homonymously transliterated, in Finnish. The result is a combination of rather absurd, grammatically incorrect, and quite often obscene phrases such as ”the geese of Nile of my own ass” or ”I protect my ass with dusty trips”. In addition, the homonymous subtitling of the title phrase of the song made Ebdo Mihemed soon known as Pensselisetä (‘Uncle Paintbrush’).

The video aroused discussion and commentary not only on the original YouTube website, but also in the Internet fora of leading newspapers and other publications. The speedy success of Mihemed on YouTube was reflected also in the more traditional media, as within two months a short interview of Mihemed was published in the monthly supplement of the biggest newspaper in the country, namely Helsingin Sanomat (Toivonen 2009), and in November 2009 he was invited to Finland by the commercial television broadcasting company Nelonen (‘Four’). By early 2010, Mihemed had toured the country twice and had published a CD entitled The Best of
Pensselisetä (Mihemmed 2010), which included ‘the hit single’ as well a dozen of other Syrian Kurdish songs.

In general terms, the discussion over the phenomenon whirled around whether or not it was to be considered racist. One rather peculiar indication of this was provided by the YouTube flagging option, as both the comments that were taken as racist and the ones in which some comments were accused of racism were usually flagged as inappropriate. A particularly heated discussion about being ‘just funny’ instead of racist was induced by an apologetic open letter to Mihemmed in a blog of a newspaper that promotes green values (Lehti 2009). The writer was for instance accused of suffering from ”xenophobia cloaked as awareness”, supported by exceptionalist claims about the Finnish mentality and unclarified conceptualisations of racism. (Aaltonen & Kärjä 2010: 16–17.) Nevertheless, it should be noted that, regardless of various stances and ideologies, in the discussion the nature of Niilin hanhet as a joke was not denied; rather, at issue was whether it was ’just a joke’ or too bad a joke.

The discussion on YouTube and other fora constitutes an important body of empirical evidence about the tensions that pertain to ethnic identities and differences, as well as to notions of racism and multiculturalism in contemporary Finland. The discussion however emerged only after the release of the Niilin hanhet video, and thus it is this originating form of textual representation, as it were, which calls for closer scrutiny. Certainly, taken the form of YouTube as a social media platform, it is debatable whether it is plausible to separate the ’broadcast’ videos from other contents, links and activities. Yet the video forms the foundation for all other elements, since it is the act of uploading the media file to the platform which creates the webpage to begin with. Therefore, my primary research material is constituted by the video itself as it is available at the YouTube website (YT 2009a), and I aim to interrogate the textual basis of Pensselisetä’s humour.

At the core of this interrogation is the act of translation, which entails examining the interrelations between verbal, visual and musical contents in terms of what is translated and how. Here, a self-evident point of departure is provided by the alleged homonymous relationship between audible Kurdish and visible Finnish, but with respect to ethnic identity construction,
also other kinds of visual and audible symbols, markers and representations are paramount. Furthermore, a pivotal starting point is constituted by the notion of ridicule as a social force, whereby attention is paid to the ways in which given textual features induce contextual positions of laughing with somebody at somebody else. At issue is thus the social politics of ridicule, the way in which laughter can both unite and divide social groups (Billig 2005: 194). In the case of Niilin hanhet, a fundamental juxtaposition is created by the coexistence of Kurds and Finns, and thus one is compelled to examine the aspects of ridicule in terms of socio-cultural differences between one transnational Middle-Eastern ethnic minority and a certain North-European independent nation-state. This means that my analysis is contextualised by the notion of 'multicultural Finland' and framed by theories associated with postcolonial studies. I will lay a particular emphasis on the ways in which the global postcolonial condition manifests itself in the north-eastern corner of Europe.

**Deep-listening for audiovisual ruptures of 'postcolonial Finland'**

In general terms, at issue here is a textual analysis of audiovisual representations that is informed by postcolonial studies. The notion of 'postcolonial Finland' is to some extent an intentional provocation; yet the point in using it is to emphasise the country’s irrevocable connections to colonial endeavours and their consequences. Finland does not differ here from other and more 'conventional' postcolonial countries in that the processes in question are multifaceted alongside several ambiguous axis of power.

On one hand, then, there is a need to acknowledge that Finland never had official overseas colonies of its own, and that until 1917 the land area now governed by the independent state of Finland was a part of first Sweden and then Russia. On the other hand, the status of autonomous Grand Duchy of Russia and subsequent rise of national consciousness within the political elite of Finland during the nineteenth century meant that models of thought which derived from Imperial Europe were influential. To some, Lutheran Christian missionary work especially in Ovambo area in contemporary Namibia since the late nineteenth century has represented a form of 'unofficial colonialism' (Raiskio 2002: 44). In the first decades of independence, in turn, racial theories were instrumental in the practices that aimed to 'civilise' the indigenous Saami.
population in the northern areas of the country, as well as in refuting any claims of Finns themselves belonging to the mongol race. In the twentyfirst century for its part, fuelled by public discussion over ’multicultural Finland’, ’immigration criticism’ and ’race-realism’, analyses of racist exceptionalism (Rastas 2007) and neoliberal corporate-driven ’complicit colonialism’ (Vuorela 2009) for instance have emerged. To highlight the tensions that are apparent both historically and contemporarily between the exotic remotedness of the country and its appreciation of imperialist thought, it may very well be located at ”the periphery of the centre” (Lehtonen & Löytt 2007).

With respect to music, the dilemma constituted by ’postcolonial Finland’ is most closely linked to the category of world music. As both linguistically and musically discernible from the Finno-Euro-American mainstreams of music in Finland, the song Pinsedi Zêde is readily subsumed into this broad generic pigeon-hole. Interwoven with mass media and mass commodification, the category of world music ties the treatment furthermore to questions about music’s significance in the even broader field of post- or neocolonial cultural industries (Manuel 2007–2011; Guilbault 2003: 191). Ebdo Mihemed came to Finland, first and foremost, to earn money; in Syria he had not been able to make a CD in his twenty-year career (Toivonen 2009), but in Finland this happened almost overnight.

In terms of the practical execution of the analysis of Niilin hanhet, my approach hinges on a form of ’deep listening’ (Bull & Back 2003) where specific attention is paid to ’ruptures’ in a given audiovisual text. In other words, I tackle social power relations as well as questions of exotism (Bull & Back 2003: 6–11) through those moments in which there are perceivable discrepancies in the ’performative song text’ (Strand 2010) that is constituted by the literary text (what is said or written), the phonotext (what does it sound like) and the videotext (what does it look like).

The subtitling of the video suggests a presence of, if not translation proper, at least a translational action that is ”a result of importation and marketing of musico-verbal material between languages and cultures” whereby especially popular musical songs of foreign origin ”have been bought and sold like commodities to be fitted to and marketed by domestic artists” (Franzon 2008: 380). Thus a central methodological question pertains to possible, probable and
unpreventable ruptures in translation, both in relation to verbal and other symbolic content. In this way, the literary translational action is juxtaposed with respective actions on the phonotextual and videotextual levels. In other words, at issue are not only the verbal out-of-sync sequences, but also the ways in which musical and visual features of *Niilin hanhet*, if not whole genres and traditions of music, may be out of synchronisation, as it were. To analyse this, however, means moving back towards the more contextual and conceptual analytical levels that are constituted by the location of Finland in debates over global postcoloniality.

’Buffalaxed’ literary twins

Through the use of subtitles, Niilin hanhet includes two literary texts. For the Finnish-speaking audience, the primary literary text consists of the subtitles, while those familiar with Kurdish can enjoy the sung lyrics. Of course, as the subtitles rest on assumed similarity to the original lyrics, the vocal delivery is crucial for the Finnish-speaking audience too. Amongst YouTube users, the practice is known most commonly as ’buffalaxing’ on the basis of the activities of YouTube username Buffalax. The buffalaxed subtitles of *Niilin hanhet* go as follows, in Finnish with English translation by me in brackets:

Leilee, leile salami / Leileeee [Layla salami]
Hanhemme petä, no emme petä (x2) [Our geese betray, well we do not betray]
No kukas hazardi? / Pensseli-setä! [Well who the hazard? / Uncle Paintbrush!]
No vissiin hazardi / Meisseli-setä! [Well surely the hazard / Uncle Screwdriver!]

Omaan perseeni, nyt hän vetää [Into one’s own my ass, now he is pulling (ie. stuffing)]
OMAN PERSEENI NIILIN HANHET! [The geese of Nile of my own ass!]
Nyt hän veteli, Niilin hanhet [Now he pulled (ie. stuffed), the geese of Nile]
Puree hirveetä, Niilin hanhet [Bites the terrible, the geese of Nile]
Viskiä vetäää [Pulls (ie. drinks) whisky]

Hanhemme petä etc.

Omaan perseeni, nyt hän vetää
Oman perseeni Niilin hanhet, nyt hän vetää
Puree hirveetä
Viskiä veteli, Niilin hanhet [Pulled (ie. drank) whisky]
Puree hirveetä, Niilin hanhet
Puree ho-hoi! (Allah!) [Bites hoh-hoy!]

Suuhun banana! (x2) [Into the mouth banana!]
Suojelen perseeni retkin samein [I protect my ass with dusty trips]
Ei ihmeitä saada [No miracles are gained]
Mer-mersu miljoona! [Mer-mercedes million!]

Hanhemme petä etc.
Omaan perseeni etc.

For the Kurdish-speaking perceivers, the central phrases go as follows, with English translations on the basis of the Finnish ones (Toivonen 2009: 15):

Leylim lêy Leylê zalim Leylê! [Layla, cruel Layla]
Hanê min pê de / Dayê min pê de [Dear mother, let me marry him]
Bixwaz hezarî / Bistîn hezarî [Ask for / demand thousand golds]
Pênsedî zêde [and five hundred more]
Hema pênsedî tu bi Helebê de ho yadê [With that five hundred you can buy the city of Aleppo]
Porê xwe berde [Free your hair, mother]
Biskê xwe bide [Open your plait]
Çûn û banyane [Oh darling, it is too late]
Çûy bi destine qîzamin [You have already gone, my dear]
Berxu mihyane [You have been traded for a flock of sheep]

How to grasp the interrelation of the two coexisting literary texts, as well as their relation to the phono- and videotext, depends of course on the language proficiency of a given perceiver. For a unilingual Finnish-speaking person the ’real’ Kurdish-language words remain obscure, and vice versa. ”The unilingual reader, who does not have the ability to judge, has to be ’satisfied’ with whatever is available, whether it is up to standard or not.” (Lefevere 1975: 3.) Yet, as the buffalaxed subtitles are the main contribution by TheKassitus, there are reasons to pay specific attention to them. Also the YouTube discussion adjacent to the video attests to the fact that Niilin
*hanhet* is appreciated more by the Finnish-speaking audience. Amongst the roughly 2500 comments there are some in English, Kurdish and Arabic, but these are overwhelmed by the ones in Finnish. (YT 2009a.) One may note in addition that also the original ‘un-buffalaxed’ performance of *Pênsedî zêde* by Mihemed is available on YouTube (YT 2008a), meaning that for unilingual Kurds there is no need to recourse to *Niilin hanhet* in order to appreciate the song.

In general discussion, *Pensselisetä* and *buffalaxing* in general have been framed as a humorous phenomena. Regarding the twin literary texts, then, the ways in which the texts provide grounds for humorous interpretations need to be addressed. For the Finnish-speaking audience, the ’original’ is of interest and possibly amusing due to its phonemic qualities rather than semantic content. Regarding the ‘original’ Kurdish-language semantic content, in turn, it is a matter of interpretation whether or not to treat the song as humorous. A narrative about a mother who has decided to 'swap' her daughter for a flock of sheep in a marriage, while the daughter’s own choice could have given enough money to buy the city of Aleppo, carries a tragic undertone especially when measured against the existing practice of prearranged marriage at a very young age (see eg. Him & Gündüz Hoşgör 2011). In any case, for the non-Kurdish-speaker the 'buffalaxed’ subtitles are vital.

**Homophobic humour as linguistic virtuosity**

While there is some disagreement whether or not this type of activity constitutes translation proper, in translation studies the practice is known as ”phonemic translation”, where the objective is ”to capture the sound of the source text at the expense of many of its other features” – which may be better achieved in literal, metric, rhyming or organic translations (Lefevere 1975: 4–5). It may be argued that phonemic translation results in two fundamental ”flaws”, as on one hand there is a tendency to rely on archaisms and obsolete words which take the translation ”often slightly beyond the boundaries of common sense”, and on the other hand both the sense and structure of the source text are distorted ”in an irresponsible manner.” One aspect of this distortion is that the phonemic translator ”clearly has no use for any tradition whatsoever”. (Lefevere 1975: 21, 24–25.)
Dispite the probability of ‘flaws’ in producing a phonemic translation, the task is not void of possible virtues. First of all, regardless of obsolete expressions or distorted structures, the translation is ”not as nonsensical as it would appear at first sight: an undercurrent of paraphrased sense lies hidden behind the attempted similarity of sound.” (Lefevere 1975: 21.) Furthermore, as the phonemic translator is ”pioneering, no doubt, on the onfines of language, or, rather, in the no-man’s land where languages supposedly overlap, [- -]ome of the comments smuggled into the target text are ingenious semantic games in their own right, [--] testifying at best to the translator’s linguistic virtuosity and inventiveness.” (Lefevere 1975: 21, 25–26.)

It is noteworthy also that the translator’s linguistic virtuosity and inventiveness, on this occasion, is built on rather obscene phrases, such as ”I protect my ass with dusty trips”. Due to the recurrent references to an ”ass” and the usage of such phallic metaphors as ”a paintbrush” (penseli) and ”a screwdriver” (meisseli) it is arguable that the buffalaxed subtitles hinge on the theme of anal sexual intercourse and by implication male homosexuality – or bestiality even, as the phrase ”the geese of Nile of my own ass” suggests. Also the stipulation to penetrate somebody’s mouth with a banana adds to the insinuations towards male homosexuality by recourse to oral – and not vaginal – sex.

This raises a question about the position of homosexuality as an object of humour. On the level of the buffalaxed literary text, answers to this dilemma can be sought both from social and aesthetic conventions. This means considering, in the first instance, the ways in which homosexuality, especially in its male form, has been and is treated in the broader socio-musical context of Finland. In addition to this, it is imperative to relate homosexuality and the use of obscene language to the more wide-spread aesthetic practices of buffalaxing.

With respect to the (ostensible) conventions of buffalaxing, a definitive point of comparison is constituted by Buffalax’s YouTube account itself. In early November 2010, there were thirty-nine uploaded video clips on the account, and already after a brief survey it becomes apparent that references to homosexuality are recurrent virtually without an exception. The examples include the following phrases: “Show the pussy boy! gay on jay a swami fish will rot!” (Lambada); ”My dick cut Coy! Malcolm has cut Coy!” (Sparrow in the Wind); ”The poop man is
fodder, but you'll get me hard!” (Du behöver); ”They’re sucking dick! Hey, they let you play, son!” (Moskau); and ”hard to fill a cock on a goo! Ben Gay! Benny, Yay! Butter Goo!” (Best Indian Music Video Ever Buffalaxed). (YT 2010.)

Regarding the socio-musical context of Finland, analyses of explicit homophobia in the musical domain of Finland are waiting for their executors, but the prevalent heteronormativity has been noted for instance in relation to mainstream popular songs (Skaffari 2008), Finnish music videos (Kärjä 2008) and Finnish-language rock music, suomirock (Skaniakos 2010: 189–190). Furthermore, building on Terhi Skaniakos’s (2010: 189–190) remark on the close connection between humorousness and heterosexual homosociality in suomirock, one is induced to enquire the role and function of (homophobic) humour in the case of Niilin hanhet. According to Skaniakos (2010: 189), the all-male groups of canonized suomirock underline their ”male bonding” or homosociality through joking and ”a jesting attitude”, conveying in a sense a message that they are together because they share a sense of humour and not because they are sexually attracted to each other. This is so although for example in documentaries they might not show any interest towards the opposite sex (Skaniakos 2010: 125). Such a heteronormative logic of humour assures that even when there would be blatantly suggestive gestures between the males, they can be dismissed as pretentious hoaxes rather than serious-minded expressions of sexual interest. Thus humour functions as a fundamental alleviating interpretive strategy against the ’threat’ of homosexuality.

Regarding Niilin hanhet, humour holds its alleviating function, but in a different mode. Whereas for the canonized suomirockers humour provides a homophobic armor that affirms the performers’ heterosexuality, Ebdo Mihemed is constructed as homosexual through homophobic humour. Here, the language of the buffalaxed subtitles can also be regarded as a form of ’broken Finnish’ on the basis of obscure phrases and few grammatical errors. Thus the literary content of the subtitles could be taken to refer to non-native Finnish speakers and thus by implication, if not by definition even, to people with recent immigrant background. When this is considered in relation to the only geographical reference in the subtitles, namely the river Nile, as well as to the explicit mentioning of Allah, an apparent outcome is the stereotype of North-African Arab muslim who mumbles incomprehensible Finnish – derogatively, in a word, an ählämi². One
might also take the female proper name Leile into account in this respect, while also pondering the extent to which the word *mersu* (a sobriquet for Mercedez-Benz) in connection to a million induces ideas about Arab oil millionaires.

**These features give** grounds to maintain that on the level of literary text alone *Niilin hanhet* effectively brings together homosexuality and immigrant muslim identity. As Islam tends to be covered in the Finnish media monolithically, one-sidedly and as a violent and fundamentalist religion (Maasila *et al.* 2008: 62–63), the notion of a homosexual muslim bears readily a connection to ideas about religious unorthodoxy or hypocrisy. These ideas are furthermore reinforced by repeated references to whisky and by the overall musical performance to begin with, as they both contradict the islamophobic, fundamentalist conceptualisations of Islam as a religious doctrine that bans alcohol and music **unequivocally**. Thus, with references to homosexuality, alcohol and music Uncle Paintbrush is constructed as triply unorthodox muslim, which in turn serves to emphasise the ludicrousness of the religious system in general, as if the guidelines of the system were impossible to follow, or as if muslims in general were devious people who disregard the guidelines intentionally.

To produce this kind of unorthodox amalgamation is to manifestly disregard the ambiguous and multifaceted dynamics and problematics of homosexuality, alcohol and music in Islamic societies and communities. Especially in relation to homosexuality, the construction of Uncle Paintbrush is to subscribe cogently to the Orientalist premises of othering, as two different marginal and ‘suspicious’ identities are put together, thus creating a doubly ‘other’ object of comparison and self-reflection for the Finnish mainstream culture in the form of a ‘gay muslim’. Continuing on the line of Orientalist interpretation, one may also consider the way in which more tropical ethnic identities – or even racist conceptualizations of beast-like jungle humans – are brought into the equation through the imperative suggestion to put a banana into somebody’s mouth.

**Phonemic and gendered ruptures**
A central audiovisual rupture in *Niilin hanhet* is constituted by the recurrent title phrase *pênsedi zêde*, as it is buffâlaxed both as *pensseli-setâ* (‘uncle paintbrush’) and as *meisseli-setâ* (‘uncle screwdriver’), while delivered in both cases recognisably similarly, with clear p-sounds in the beginning. Thus it is the word *meisseli* (‘screwdriver’ or ‘chisel’) in particular which calls for a closer scrutiny. In salacious vernacular parlance, one of the most common connotations of the word is the penis, and thus the buffâlaxing rests on an emphasis on sexual innuendo. The word *pensseli* (‘paintbrush’) may be interpreted in a similar way too, especially if one juxtaposes the tool’s physical shape with male pubic region – the word is however arguably less common in this sense than *meisseli*. The videotext of *Niilin hanhet* further obfuscates as to how to decipher the word, as it may be taken as a reference to Mihemed’s thick wide moustache. Some half a dozen YouTube commentators have in fact noted his ‘lovely’ or ‘scary’ mostachios, albeit the performers’ eye-brows were commented upon more often.

The phonemic translation of *pênsedi* as both *pensseli* and *meisseli* nevertheless suggests that in *Niilin hanhet*, the sexually charged connotations are more important than audible similarity. One might note here however that the three words are all based on a succession of rather similar phonemes in that a wovel sequence *e–e–i* (*e–e–i* in the International Phonetic Alphabet) is surrounded by a labial consonant (*p, m*) in the beginning, a sibilant (*s*) in the middle and an alveolar consonant (*d, l*) in the last syllable. The p-words, as it were, are furthermore alike in that they have an alveolar *n* before the sibilant; in *meisseli*, the *n* has dissolved into the wovel *i*. This phonemic similarity in turn indicates that it is possible to mishear the word *pênsedi* as *meisseli*, especially with the subtitles and, importantly, low-fidelity sound quality.

Thus *meisseli* constitutes a form of deliberate mishearing. This in effect constitutes a form of psychosomatic stress as the implication is that the assumed listeners have to convince themselves of that they are not hearing correctly. The strain is nonetheless alleviated by the alleged humorousness of references to male genitalia and, in the context of the whole song, homosexuality. The same applies to buffâlaxing of *zalim* as *salami* and *çûn û banyane* as *suuhun banana* (‘into the mouth banana’; although the correct Finnish word would be *banaani*). In other words, by using two phallic metaphors that are based on deliberate mishearing – as the Kurdish sibilants *z* and *ç* (Collapse IPA) are clearly different from the one and only Finnish *s* – and supported
by insinuations of penetration in connection with a videotext depicting an all-male performance, the performers are constructed as homosexuals. The extent of homophobia can then be measured by the extent to which the audiovisual text is supposedly funny.

Also the phrases puree hirveetä (‘bites [something that is] terrible’) and viskiä vetää (‘pulls [ie. drinks heavily] whisky’) at the middle parts of Niilin hanhet constitute audiovisual ruptures, but not so much in phonemic sense as pênsedi. The original Kurdish phrase for the former is porê xwe berde, that is, a suggestion for the mother to free her hair. In the video, Ebdo Mihemed emphasises the suggestion with a distinctive gesture, as he first runs his palm down on the side of his head and then spreads his fingers rightwards. This is followed immediately by the Kurdish words biskê xwe bide, which is to ask the mother to open her plait, supported by Mihemed’s gesture where he runs his hand down on the side of his head and neck, but with loosely bent fingers this time, as if he would hold a thick plait. He gesticulates similarly also at the end of the video, as the phrases reoccur. (Figures 1–4.)

Figures 1–4. Ebdo Mihemed’s hand gestures at 1:06, 1:07, 1:08 and 1:53, respectively, in the Niilin hanhet video (YT 2009a).

At these particular points of the video, Mihemed manifestly brings forth the gendered aspects of the performance, as – in Kurdish – he as a male performance is making a physical reference to female identity. Insofar as his character is associated with (fundamentalist) Islam, also freedom of female expression becomes an issue. Whether or not it is a mere coincidence that all the persons depicted in Niilin hanhet are male, the performance reinforces the idea that in muslim societies and communities, women are not allowed to perform music in public, if at all. However, as the two protagonists of the song are female, the centrality of women for Kurdish culture and society is acknowledged, even if in a slightly satirical manner. Mihemed’s rendition of the song further amplifies this recognition, as he subordinates his masculine physical presence to the need to represent female identity.
The buffalaxing of the phrases with references to biting and alcohol abuse blurs all this; for the unilingual Finns in the assumed audience, the most apparent risk is that the underlying recognition of gender dynamics is dissipated totally. What is readily conveyed instead, is an impression of an unorthodox or deviant muslim who breaks the fundamentalist religious code not only by performing music but being so inebriate that he ends up making effeminate gestures, thus revealing also his homosexuality. And this is of course very funny. Once more, then, the fear of homosexuality is projected onto the visually present ethnic other and alleviated through laughing at the absurdity of drunken gay muslims, without no consideration whatsoever for the psychosocial stress gay muslim identity may cause to an individual.

Also, to the extent to which Mihemed’s gestures allude to the corporeal appreciation of music through dancing, problems arise both in relation to ideas of masculinity and Finnish music. Despite – and because – of the world-wide fame of select male dancers, it has been noted within dance studies that dancing males are generally perceived simultaneously as anomalies and by definition queer (eg. Burt 1995). This of course is a very ’western’ argument, since there is a substantial amount of evidence of the fact that while female expressive behaviour would be highly sanctioned, public dancing prevails. In relation to Finnish music, in turn, it might be noted that within the genres of rock and metal especially, men do not dance (Kärjä 2008). Genres that adhere to folk and social dancing (eg. polka, waltz, tango) provide men in Finland with a chance to express their corporeal sentiments without risking the national-cultural heteronormativity, whereas in stage and pop dancing this apparently can be done only within the virile confines of break dance.

In addition to the hand gestures by Mihemed and one of the back-up vocalists, as well as occasional curtsy-like movements by Mihemed and the keyboardist, there are no actual dance movements depicted in Niilin hanhet. An obvious explanation for this is the fact that apart from Mihemed, all performers are firmly positioned behind their instruments or microphone stands; and also the male rockers in Finland are ’allowed’ to sway ’effeminately’ with their tools. Nonetheless, a homo- and islamophobic perceiver will no doubt have any difficulties in translating these gestures as deviant too, but to pursuit this line of argumentation further would need backup from for example audience surveys. In fact, the editing of Niilin hanhet by
The Kassitus suggests quite the opposite, as if one compares the clip to the one from which it has been abridged (YT 2008a), it becomes evident that movements resembling dance even more closely (figure 5) have been cut out among other ‘un-buffalaxable’ passages such as instrumental soli and lengthier Leylê-ululations. But this hardly is a surprise, as the whole practice of buffalaxing rests on alleged phonemic similarity and not – or at least not decisively – on images of dancing males. Otherwise, The Kassitus would certainly have chosen another piece from the series of YouTube videos to which the original Pênsedi zêde footage belongs (figures 6–8).

Figure 5 (left): Ebdo Mihemed moving his fingers and crouching slightly to the sounds of ney reed flute produced by the synthesizer at 6:17 of the original Pênsedi zêde footage (YT 2008a).

Figures 6–8: Ebdo Mihemed and one of the back-up singers dancing at 1:39, 6:34 and 6:43 of the performance of another song in the original footage (YT 2008b).

The omission of dance-like sequences may work in another direction too, as it deprives Kurdish male identity from a distinctive expressive practice. Here, the differences between Kurdish communities and the Finnish society become paramount, especially in relation to cultural conventions that regulate public performances in terms of gender. In other words, representing Kurdish men as unwilling or even incapable of dancing, their cultural conventions are downplayed and subordinated to the Finnish ‘western’ ones.

Ruptures in musicovisual aesthetics

Visually, the Niilin hanhet video hardly stands out from the plethora of YouTube videos. The total duration of the clip is 2 min 2 s, and broadcast with low resolution (240p) streaming. There are no visual effects or zooming in the video, and the image centres predominantly on Ebdo Mihemed as he sings. There are occasional rapid montage sequences especially during the first 15 seconds, and some sections are filmed with a slightly slanted camera. Often, behind Mihemed one can see a keyboardist with two synthesizers in one stand, and there are several sections with two background vocalists filling the image frame. During a short instrumental interlude roughly at the middle of the song, the keyboardist is documented alongside with a long-neck lute.
(tembûr) instrumentalist and a darbuka-percussionist. In the visuals, the performers are situated in a corner of a relatively large room. There is no audience on-screen. In one scene, one can also see another cameraman behind Mihemed, focussing his massive shoulder-held equipment on the background singers. All the persons depicted are male. The performers are dressed up casually and non-uniformly; Mihemed himself is performing with a light blue shirt and a yellow tie but without a jacket, whereas one of the supporting vocalists wears a black leather jacket on top of a grey sweater and the other has a gray two-piece suit. The tembûr-player in turn has a light blue sweater and a pair of trousers, and the darbuka-percussionist wears an orange sweater with light blue jeans. The keyboardist has a black jacket and trousers and a white t-shirt with some images or text on it.

The presence of the cameraman in the frame (figures 1–3 above) constitutes a rupture that is related to visual editing. This makes it clear that the footage has been recorded with at least two separate video cameras, which in turn suggests that a considerable effort has been made in order to document the performance audiovisually (in the other ‘original’ clips, one can occasionally see a third camera too). This is furthermore corroborated by the amount of microphones visible: one for each of the three vocalists, one for the darbuka-player as he sings back-up lines as well, one for the darbuka itself, and one for the tembûr. With respect to the amount of technical preparation and work, one may note that the total duration of the five ‘original’ YouTube clips that depict Mihemed and his band in the same venue is 25 min 55 s, the individual clip lengths ranging from 4 min 21 s to 9 min 36 s. In the end, then, at issue is a deliberate and pre-planned endeavour to capture the performances with audiovisual recording equipment.

The rupture caused by the cameraman in the frame is yet related more to the idea of ’music video aesthetics’ (Mundy 1999) than to the phonemic translation of the lyrics for example. The same goes for the casual attire and the absense of elaborate settings and props. These ruptures nevertheless foreground the problematics of translation, although in another mode, as a significant ‘translational gap’ is formed between the MTV-inflected global music video production standards and Syrian Kurd wedding song footage. But as the latter is distributed through YouTube with the usage of the term ’music video’ (YT 2008a) as well as occasional montage sequences and slanted framing, there is no precondition to dismiss the edited end
product as something else than a music video. It is a Syrian Kurd wedding song music video, period. **Multiple cameras, editing and YouTube dissemination further suggest** that it is intended for promotional purposes exactly like the similar products of the transnational music industry. One can also examine *Niilin hanhet* or *Pênsedi zêde* in relation to the conventional classification of ‘western’ music videos into narrative, performance/documentary and conceptual/allegorical clips or modes (Frith 1988; Vernallis 2004: 40), whereby what one has here would be a representative of the middle category. However, the absence of visual audience further suggests that the recording is not from a live concert per se but instead realised with promotion and marketing in mind.

The general music video aesthetics are also ruptured by buffalaxing itself, as the preoccupation to mishear the lyrics yields extensive omissions from the original footage. The sections that have been cut out from the *Pênsedi zêde* performance (YT 2008a) in order to create the buffalaxed *Niilin hanhet* (YT 2009a) are the opening 1 min 20 s, passages 2:33–5:58 and 6:09–6:29, as well as the final 50 s (table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0:00</td>
<td>tembûr solo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0:35</td>
<td>EM recites with sustained high-pitched descending <em>Leylê</em> phrases, accompanied by repeated riffs on tembur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1:20)</td>
<td><strong>NH start</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:28</td>
<td>&quot;<em>Hanhemme petä...</em>&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:33</td>
<td>synth solo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:44</td>
<td>tembûr (with synth)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3:13</td>
<td><em>Leylê...</em> (similar to 0:35)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4:05</td>
<td>new verse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4:45</td>
<td><em>Hanê min pê de...</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5:16</td>
<td>synth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5:26</td>
<td>tembûr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5:54</td>
<td>new verse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5:58</td>
<td>&quot;<em>Suu hun banana...</em>&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6:09</td>
<td>EM continues with <em>berxu mihyane</em> phrases</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6:29</td>
<td>&quot;<em>Hanhemme petä...</em>&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7:05</td>
<td><em>Leylê...</em> (similar to 0:35)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
7:35 synthesized snare sound
7:55 end

Table 1. Timeline comparison between *Pênsedi zêde* (YT 2008a) and *Niilin hanhet* (YT 2009a; in bold).

There is one entire verse (4:05–4:45) omitted, *in all likelihood* because it does not lend itself so easily to the phonemic translation from Kurdish to Finnish. Yet what is significant in terms of music video aesthetics in particular is the excision of instrumental interludes and soli. Especially in the guitar-oriented genres of rock and metal to dismiss the instrumentalists’ virtuosity by not concentrating on their physical skills in close-ups during the solo sections would be to fight against the representational conventions of music videos (cf. Vernallis 2004: 76, 220). In the case of *Pênsedi zêde*, the long-necked lute *tembûr* holds a similar position to that of ’western’ electric guitar, as lengthy soli are performed with it at the beginning of the song as well as twice in the middle parts. During the soli, the image is focussed on the instrumentalist, fortified by the use of different camera angles (figures 9–11) which only increases the connections to ’music video aesthetics’ (cf. Vernallis 2004: 111). The other instrumentalists are not subjected to a similar treatment, which highlights the significance of the *tembûr*-player even further; the keyboard-player gets his own close-ups occasionally but without any angle effects (figure 12), and the *darbuka*-player is visible only with the other two instrumentalists. The last visual composition is also the only one where the instrumentalists are shown in *Niilin hanhet* (figure 13).

<insert images here>

Figures 9–11. The *tembûr*-player in *Pênsedi zêde* (YT 2008a), at 0:25, 2:49 and 5:30, respectively.

<insert images here>

Figure 12 (left). The keyboard-player in *Pênsedi zêde* (YT 2008a), at 0:02.
Figure 13 (right). The instrumentalists in *Niilin hanhet* (YT 2009a), at 1:13.
To exclude central instrumental sections that are executed formally, while not maybe in terms of technical equipment, according to the conventions of transnational music videos, is to emphasise the fundamental alienness and otherness of *Niilin hanhet* and 'Pensseli-setä’ further. Thus, through ‘buffalaxed’ editing, the original music video aesthetics of *Pênsedi zêde*, regardless of their quality, are transformed and translated into something that may be vaguely termed as ‘YouTube aesthetics of access’ (cf. Hilderbrand 2007: 54). This is to say that in contrast to the high-definition and high-fidelity standards of music video aesthetics, YouTube aesthetics rely on the lowest possible technical quality. The practice of buffalaxing demonstrates that this is not only a matter of faster downloading or streaming, but a fundamental precondition for the whole aesthetic practice to be functional and comprehensible in the first place. In other words, the buffalaxing phonemic translator’s "linguistic virtuosity and inventiveness” (Lefevere 1975: 26) rests vitally on downmarket quality both in visuals and sound, as blurred movements and slurred words make it easy to create something completely different from the original. In the words of one online commentator:

The funniest thing is that Kurdish does not resemble Finnish in any way. It can be noticed while listening to the piece again with a slightly better quality. The poor quality of the video brings in the possibility for a mock version. Which is rather poor also otherwise, if one compares to other similar ones where the lyrics have almost some significance.

(‘Ihmettelijä’, HS 2009a; author’s translation.)

**Sectional and metric translations in neo-Finnish folk music**

An essential part of the performative song text is constituted by the solely musical features, ie. the non-verbal sonorous dimensions. With respect to translation, it is therefore necessary also to consider the ways in which the shift from *Pensedî Zêde* to *Niilin hanhet* is implicated in processes of musical translation. In *The Best of Pensselisetâ* sleeve notes (Mihemmed 2010), the original song is labelled as 'Flklor Kurdi’, ie. Kurdish folk song. In the YouTube rendition of it as *Niilin hanhet* the music is, despite the high compression of the clip and the resulting low-fidelity sound, recognisably something else than the mainstream forms of 'Finnish’ music – or music in Finland, for that matter. In other words, its percussive patterns, instrumental and vocal ornamentation, as well as its general timbral qualities differ from the categories of music that
have been repeatedly associated with Finnish-ness, be it ‘Sibelian’ art music, Karelian or Central-European folk music, suomirock (ie. Finnish-language rock), newer styles of metal, or any variation of iskelmä (ie. Finnish Schlager or middle-of-the-road entertainment music), especially tango (cf. Oramo 2007–2011; Kolehmainen 2007–2011; Jalkanen & Kurkela 2003). It also resides outside the all-pervasive styles of English-language pop and rock.

In the actual Niilin hanhet video, there are no indications about the generic classification of the song. Yet with its strophic form, initial melismas supported by lêlê-like vocables and recurrent melodic and rhythmic patterns, the song adheres closely to the conventional characteristics of the evînî (love songs), şer (heroic songs) or beyt (narratives in rhymed verse) categories of traditional Kurdish music. The Kurdish-language lyrical content supports the connection to the evînî category further, as well as to the hijikirini (hij kirin, ’to make love’) where tragical stories about the love of a woman are central. (Cf. Christensen 2002: 747–748 & 2007–2011).

To a person unfamiliar with the classificatory subtleties of Kurdish folk music, the formal connections between Niilin hanhet and evînî or hijikirini remain insignificant. To a substantial extent this is amplified by the editing done to create the buffalaxed clip. Not only has the length been diminished to one fourth of the original, but also the sectional alterations have been compressed into a form of ABABCAB structure which as an expansion of the classic Tin Pan Alley ballad AABA formula is very common in ’western’ popular music (table 2; cf. Middleton 2007–2011).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>section</th>
<th>bars</th>
<th>tonic</th>
<th>lyrics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>e</td>
<td>Hanhemme petä ...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>e – a</td>
<td>Omaan perseeni ...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>e</td>
<td>Hanhemme petä ...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B'</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>e – a</td>
<td>Omaan perseeni ...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>10~</td>
<td>a – e</td>
<td>Suuhun banana ...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>e</td>
<td>Hanhemme petät ...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B&quot;</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>e – a</td>
<td>Omaan perseeni ... (with fade out)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. The musical sections of Niilin hanhet with bar count and tonal centres.
While this formal truncation might be considered as a kind of ‘sectional translation’ from Kurdish folklore towards 'Finno-western’ pop expression, the outcome is ruptured by tonal and metric features in particular. Regarding the former, the song is rather fixed tonally; some shifts occur as puree hirveetä/porê xwe berde phrases are sung a fifth below the dominant tonal centre and suuhun banana/cûn û banyane in turn a fourth above (cf. table 2). In other words, the tripartite functional harmonic progressions that dominate Finno-western pop expression are absent from Niilin hanhet.

In terms of the metric features of the song, the phonemic translation of the song has resulted in what resembles the ’broken lines’ or ”destr[uction of] the regular stress pattern” (Roos & Lehiste 1998: 325) of for example Kalevala metre that constitutes a canonised national emblem of its own, named so on the basis of the national epic of Finland. Nevertheless, this kind of contradiction between ”the natural word stress” and ”the poetic stress” (Hill 2005: 198) is evident in the opening lines of the song. As the stress is always on the first syllable in Finnish language, the very first phrase of the song, ”han-hem-me pe-tä”, is inconsistent in that the crotchet on hem moves the stress to the second syllable and away from the initial beat of the bar (example 1). In the case of the second line, ”no em-me pe-tä”, the crotchet on em has a similar result, amplified by the fact that em indeed is the first syllable of the word. The opening no (’well’) is in an odd place too, since usually it is used as an upbeat expletive – as in the third line, ”no ku-kas ha-zar-di?” (which in fact fits in nicely with the Finnish stress patterns, as does the key phrase ”pens-se-li-se-tä”).

Example 1. The opening eight bars of the first A section of Niilin hanhet, with Kurdish (above) and Finnish (below) lyrics.

Alongside the ’sectional translation’ of music, then, there is an element of ’metric translation’ present as well. Yet while these both bring Pênsedî zêde closer to the more conventional forms of music in Finland, there is no threat of total assimilation due to the instrumental sounds, vocal delivery, general ornamentation and rhythmic features. More specifically put, the timbral
qualities of *tembûr* and *darbuka* in particular differ from the popular and folk mainstreams of music in Finland, as do the forceful high-pitched vocals of Mihemed – thus bringing forth once more the characteristics of traditional Kurdish music (cf. Christensen 2002: 745 & 2007–2011). The statistical strangeness of the instrumental and vocal timbres is further underpinned by the occasional chromatic ornamentation in between sung phrases (cf. example 1, bars 2 and 4) and the mere presence of *darbuka* rhythm patterns. The use of specific percussion instrumentation and patterns is paramount as it accentuates the differences on one hand from the standard drum kit of popular music and, on the other, from the very few percussion instruments of Finnish folk music. Traditional Finnish folk percussions, in addition, tend to be signalling devices and are rarely used in folk music ensembles, where the typical outline comprises of two fiddles, an accordion and a double bass. (Kolehmainen 2007–2011.) In the 'contemporary', 'modernised' or 'new' folk music produced by Finnish artists, in turn, there hardly is more room for traditional percussions, as the ‘percs’ in this case include mainly ”personalized drum sets; percussive sounds made unconventionally on acoustic instruments; synthesizers; and live ‘ethnic’ percussion such as frame drums, Cuban cajones, djembes, and other African drums” (Hill 2005: 276–277).

Now, it is suspicable that *darbuka* is just as 'ethnic’ a percussion as the other ones, and thus to encounter one in the ranks of contemporary folk music in Finland should not be a surprise. The presence of ’ethnic’ instruments nevertheless points to a terminological and ideological quagmire where distinctions between ’traditional’ and ’contemporary’ Finnish folk music are further projected on the global notion – and markets – of ’world music’. While the Finnish representatives of ’contemporary folk’ may identify themselves with ”contemporary Nordic folk/world music scene” (Hill 2005: 280), in their home-country they are marketed rather as ’neo-folk’ than ’world music’ artists. Outside Finland, in turn, they tend to be labelled unquestionably as world music performers (cf. Ramnarine 2003: 198).

In addition to the ’ethnic’ sounds, the visual and linguistic presence of Ebdo Mihemed and his fellow musicians reinforce the connection to the category of world music; their complexion and hair differs from the normative paleness of Finns, and the use of Kurdish language (or ’broken Finnish’, if one wishes to delude oneself vituperatively) ties them to a geographical area that is
geopolitically contested in that it lacks a national sovereignty while named as an entity – Kurdistan, ’the land of the Kurds’. Despite the approximation of Finnish language in *Niilin hanhet*, or rather exactly because of it, the audiovisually perceivable Orient-ness of the performance distances Uncle Paintbrush comfortably from the mainstream musics in and of Finland by situating it in the mutually indistinguishable plethora of world musics. Thus while a number of linguistic and cultural translational acts cause Pênsedî zêde, in the guise of *Niilin hanhet*, to converge to more conventional forms of ’Finnish’ musics, the song, the performance and the phenomenon remains outside the core of Finnish-ness. This makes Uncle Paintbrush useful not only in terms of projecting homophobic attitudes, but also with respect to celebrating the nation’s tolerance towards ethnic and cultural differences.

The vehement albeit short-lived effervescence around Mihemed in late 2009 and early 2010 suggests furthermore that for a brief moment at least, this type of ’ethnic music’ became ’Finnish’; alongside the *Pênsedî zêde* and *Niilin hanhet* videos, one can find clips from venues in Finland where people are also singing along, with the buffalaxed lyrics of course (eg. YT 2009b; figure 14). This ’neo-Finnishness’⁹, *in the form of neo-Finnish folk music as it were*, was nevertheless exploited and forgotten quickly. After a couple of tours in some of the major cities in Finland, at rather suburban venues, Mihemed returned to Efrîn, Syria, and by mid-August 2010 the whole Uncle Paintbrush phenomenon was deemed as a thing of the past by a leading music journalist (Kotirinta 2010) – which of course may be more an indication of embarrassment than actual decline in Mihemed’s popularity. The YouTube viewer count and the continuing absence of Mihemed from Finnish media indicate however that the days of Uncle Paintbrush fervour are indeed over.⁴

<insert image here>

Figure 14. Eبدو Mihemed performing *Pênsedî zêde* at Peltolammin saluuna (’Saloon of Peltolammi’) in Tampere on 20 November 2009, with the presence of other influential figures of popular music in, if not of, Finland (footage uploaded by YouTube user ’samiflix’; YT 2009b, at 0:59).

**Conclusion**
To a person who is familiar with the mainstream musics of Finland, differences between these and *Niilin hanhet* are quite simply material in both audible and visible forms. In making sense of these differences, however, one is bound to rely on the ideological realm of traditions. In contrast to Lefevere’s (1975: 24–25) initial claim about the fundamental uselessness of traditions for a phonemic translator, ideas about distinct cultural traditions in fact become paramount in order to juxtapose verbal, visual and musical markers of ethnic identity meaningfully. Ideas about one’s own tradition are furthermore pivotal in conceptualising somebody else’s cultural expression as strange and other. Thus, in the case of *Niilin hanhet*, the othered lump of monolith Middle-Eastern-ness is measured against likewise rigid ideas about Finnish-ness. In the final analysis, through the homo- and islamophobic amalgamation of references to ethnicity, sexuality and religion, *Niilin hanhet* is constructed as a site for triple otherness, from which only humour can provide an safe exit. In essence, then, the audiovisual presence of the triply other is fundamental for the buffalaxed humour to emerge and exist. This entails also recognising the various levels of translation that operate in buffalaxing: linguistic, visual and musical. At the core of the issue are furthermore the dynamics between translated and untranslatable aspects on all these levels.

While parts of the original audiovisual performance of *Pênsedî zêde* are present in *Niilin hanhet*, the superimposition of the buffalaxed lyrics transforms the meaning of the original parts too, rendering them fundamentally funny in their absurdity. In other words, through the phonemic translation of the verbal content also the ‘untranslated’ visuals and musical sounds translate, not materially but ideologically.

In relation to the dynamics of material phonemic and immaterial ideological translation, the importance of temporal dimensions cannot be overlooked. While a literary translation can be produced in principle in a matter of minutes, the broader cultural translation (cf. Bhabha 1994: 226–229) of a musical genre for example takes usually decades. In this respect, it would be tempting to compare *Niilin hanhet* to the reception of both tango and rock in Finland, as it took at least a quarter of a century for both of these to be accepted as inherently ‘Finnish’ forms of expression. In their initial phases, both were encountered as exotic entertainment that was expected to wane quickly. In relation to both, issues of ethnicity were central too, as tango hinged on Central European conceptualisations and stereotypes about Latin-American-ness and
Argentine-ness in particular, and rock in turn was implicated in unsubstantiable concerns about African American frivolities. Popular tangos and rock’n’roll tunes were translated quickly into Finnish language in the 1920s and 1950s, respectively, but it took more than 20 years for them to be celebrated as ‘Finnish’ also in musical terms. (See Jalkanen & Kurkela 2003.) In the light of this, one might speculate whether ėvīnī-type music will constitute one trajectory of quintessentially ‘Finnish’ music in the 2040s or thereabouts. Yet in comparison to tango and rock, one might note a crucial difference in terms of institutional back-up, as these genres were promoted by international recording industry. Pênsedî zêde in turn is after all more likely to be lost in the plethora of world music and YouTube clips.

The juxtaposition to tango and rock nevertheless suggests that there is continuity in the ways in which ethnic and cultural difference is encountered and otherness constructed, musically and otherwise. Humour, in the form of ridicule, constitutes a discriminatory mechanism that is economic in the sense of exploiting material resources as efficiently as possible. To turn the other into a joke rather than excluding or incarcerating it is to keep the door open for financial profits too. To bring these concerns to date with the era of creative economy, one should not forget that Niilin hanhet provided Ebdo Mihemed with more lucrative earning possibilities than ever before, as he toured Finland twice and was able to record a full CD album. According to several daily press interviews, Mihemed was particularly pleased about the realisation of the CD, but the fact nonetheless remains that he had no control whatsoever over the production and release of Niilin hanhet video. In terms of copyrights, TheKassitus is the author of the video and while responsible to a significant if not decisive degree of Mihemed’s success, paradoxically also guilty of copyright infringement. So far, more than four years after the initial upload of the video that is, apparently no infringement claims have been made to YouTube management about Niilin hanhet, as the clip is still available on the site. The same does not apply to the eponymous progenitor of the aesthetic practice as by April 2011 Buffalax’s account had been ”terminated because we [at YouTube] have received multiple third-party notifications of copyright infringement from claimants” (YT 2010).

The paradoxes of Niilin hanhet do not end with copyright issues. Although ideas about traditions are central for deciphering cultural differences, at the same time the traditions are greeted with
Insensitive irreverence. This is blatantly manifest in the commercial exoticism that exploits and sells YouTube success instead of any living musical tradition, but it transpires also in the essentialist ‘just-a-joke’ attitude that surrounds the practice of buffalaxing as a whole. As everything is subjected to jesting, there is no need to worry about any possible or probable aspects of insult. After all, one is not supposed to take it seriously. In the YouTube commentary and other online discussion about Niilin hanhet, some counter-examples were in fact brought forth by those who did not share the majority’s taunting stance:

A respectable artist, who in his own culture and in his own language performs apparently sentimental love songs, has been turned into an imbecile fool who is made to perform vulgar ditties. [---] Dear Swedes, go on now and do a variant of Jukka Kuoppamäki’s piece ”Sininen ja valkoinen” [‘Blue and white’] as ”Gin igen, ja, vallpojken!” (Gin again, yes, herder-boy!). [---] There would really be quite an ado and gnashing on this side of the Gulf of Bothnia!

(’Hannes Kuoppa’, HS 2009b; author’s translation.)

The ‘just-a-joke’ essentialism entails furthermore a total lack of socio-cultural contextualisation, which in turn implies a profound disregard towards differences in the identity struggles of Kurds and Finns. This calls into play the postcolonial politics of identity, whereby at issue is not only the most recent crisis of Finnish-ness but also the oppressed status of Kurdish minorities in different parts of Al-Jazira (Upper Mesopotamia) especially. Regarding Finnish-ness, Niilin hanhet serves both as an affirmation of Northern, non-Islamic, heteronormative identity and an indication of exceptionalist ‘funlandisation’ at work, referring to a mode of thinking according to which one’s own nation is equipped with a more sophisticated sense of humour than others (Kärjä 2011) – though the sophisticatedness of ‘Uncle Paintbrush’ humour is of course debatable. With respect to Kurdish-ness, in contrast, the buffalaxing of Pênsedî zêde attests to an age-old condition of Orientalist subordination in which Kurdish identity is equated with myriad other Middle-Eastern Islamic others and thus provides an apt ground for projecting ‘western’ prejudices.

The qualitative (mis)representations hinge furthermore on quantitative dimensions of scale, time and distance. In 2010, there were some eight thousand Kurdish-speaking inhabitants in Finland, which constitutes only 1.5 per mille of the total population and roughly three per cent of the
immigrant population in the country (SF 2011). Regarding Kurds world-wide, the minority in Finland represents an approximate percentage value of 0.03, depending on the source of statistics (EBO 2011). The minimal share is paramount in facilitating Orientalising and otherwise questionable representations of the group, as it for its part ensures the political insignificance of the minority. This insignificance is further amplified by the relatively recent immigration of Kurds into Finland, as well as the sheer geographical distance. At stake is also the geopolitical distance; in other words, there are no neighbourly foreign policy relations to be considered – or, as Kurds do not govern their own sovereign country, it would appear there is no reason to be mindful of any foreign policy relations at all. Moreover, in terms of domestic policy, the swift rise in the popularity of the populist, 'immigration critical' party Perussuomalaiset (a.k.a. 'True Finns') during 2009–2011 in particular (see eg. YLE 2013) suggests a shift towards a more fertile ground for ridiculing and outright racist representations of otherness.

In relation to this ease of Orientalising on the basis of the size of the population, historical immigration and geopolitical remoteness, obvious points of comparison are constituted by other ethnic minorities in Finland. While the scale of such 'traditional’ ethnic groups as Saami and Tatars is not too different from Kurds, their historical presence goes beyond first-hand recollections. In the case of Saami, questions about the status and rights of indigenous peoples surface too, which inevitably suggests the prevalence of geographical intimacy. The problematics of historical and physical vicinity pertain also to the relationships with and attitudes towards Roma, Russians and Swedes. Regarding the first of these, there is a great deal of historical evidence of systematic oppression and forcible assimilation on the part of the State of Finland, while with respect to the two latter prejudices and disdain rest on an opposite direction of historical dominance. In addition, the more recent emergence of the Somali minority in Finland is of particular weight due to their visible difference from the normative Finnish-ness because of skin colour. In terms of time and distance the Somali minority corresponds Kurds in Finland quite closely, but their social, cultural and political presence is more pronounced because of the size of the community, not to mention the centrality of blackness in the global history of racism.
This detour to the minority politics of Finland serves to point out that it is socially, culturally and politically – and economically – ’safer’ to produce ridiculing buffalaxed translations of Syrian Kurdish wedding songs than, say, Saami joiks or leudds. This comparison alone attests to the ways in which there is no such thing as ‘just a joke’; instead, humour constitutes a deeply political dimension of human existence in that it brings forth questions about social and cultural hierarchies, especially when explicitly associated with ethnic minorities.

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1 Spelling is in alignment with Mihemed’s website (www.ebdomihemed.net; accessed 22 Nov 2013); in TheKassitus’s video as well as in the CD release, the surname is spelled Mihemmed. The Arabic form of the name is Abdo Mohemed.

2 The word derives onomatopoetically from the Arabian welcoming phrase ahlan wa sahlan and is roughly translatable as a ’dune coon’.

3 A neologism for people with recent immigrant background.

4 In 2012, however, Mihemed commented on the conflict in Syria in the Finnish daily press, and later in the year there was some concern over his well-being as he could not be reached for a moment.

5 A proper Finnish male name and thus not necessarily a pseudonym.


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