Vocabularies of (In)Visibilities: (Re)Making the Afro-Turk Identity

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Abstract

After the abolition of slavery towards the end of the Ottoman Empire, the majority of freed black slaves who remained in Anatolia were taken to state "guesthouses" in a number of cities throughout the Empire, the most important of which was in Izmir. Despite their longstanding presence, the descendants of these black slaves – today, citizens of the Republic of Turkey – have until recently remained invisible both in the official historiography and in academic scholarship of history and social science. It is only since the establishment of the Association of Afro-Turks in 2006 that the black population has gained public and media attention and a public discussion has finally begun on the legacies of slavery in Turkey. Drawing on in-depth interviews with members of the Afro-Turk community (2014-2016), I examine the key role of the foundation of the Afro-Turk Association in reshaping the ways in which they think of themselves, their shared identity and history.

Keywords: Afro-Turks, Ottoman slavery, Turkishness, blackness

Introduction

"Who are the Afro-Turks?" has been the most common response I got from my friends and family back home in Turkey, who were puzzled to hear that my doctoral research concerned the experiences of the Afro-Turk community. I would explain to them that the Afro-Turks are the descendants of enslaved Africans who were brought to the Ottoman Empire over a period of 400 years and this brief introduction helped them *recall*. After a short conversation, their initial puzzlement gave way to reminiscence: they started to *remember* either specific Afro-Turks who had been their schoolmates, or did military service with them, or who were their neighbors some decades ago. Sometimes they *remembered* a famous Afro-Turk singer from the 1970s, a football player, or some black characters from Turkish novels. Only at that moment did my research topic start to make sense to them. It was striking

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to observe how black Turks have been *forgotten*, but also *remembered* by the community with whom they lived side by side for centuries, and thus, how black Turks have been *(in)visibilized*.

The historians Ehud Toledano (1998) and Hakan Erdem (1996) suggest that the ancestors of the black people living in Turkey today were brought to the Ottoman Empire (1299-1922) as slaves from various parts of Africa[1]. Despite their longstanding presence, the descendants of these black slaves – today, citizens of the Republic of Turkey – have until recently remained invisible both in the official historiography and in academic scholarship of history and social science. It is only since the establishment of the the Africans' Culture and Solidarity Organization (in Turkish, *Afrikalılar Kültür ve Dayanışma Derneği*), an organization founded by Mustafa Olpak in 2006, that the black population has gradually gained public and media attention and a public discussion has finally begun on the legacies of slavery in Turkey. The Africans' Culture and Solidarity Organization – also known as "The Afro-Turks Association" or, simply, "the Association" (hereafter ACSO or the Association) – aims to provide a venue for black Turks to come together and learn about their shared history. Against the backdrop of the widespread ambivalence, if not systematic blindness, towards black Turks' existence in Turkey, the recently coined term "Afro-Turk" has initially been disorienting for the Turkish society, and "who are the Afro-Turks?" became the immediate reaction to my mere mentioning of the term.

In this article, I draw on in-depth interviews (2014-2016) with Afro-Turks to discuss how black Turks have redrawn their racial and ethnic boundaries after the ACSO was founded. In order to do so, I focus particularly on the vocabulary by which they define themselves before and after the foundation of the ACSO in 2006[2]. Indeed, the establishment of ACSO triggered significant transformations in the ways in which black Turks think of themselves and reflect on their history and their shared identity in a Muslim majority society in which whiteness is subtle, yet, integral to what it means to be the "authentic" Turk. Before the establishment of ACSO, black Turks had almost no social visibility and public recognition in the mainstream national media and press, nor in scholarly research. On the rare occasions when black Turks appeared in the national media, they were generally presented

1 This included both the North African coasts and sub-Saharan Africa, at different periods of the Ottoman slave trade over the centuries. Toledano (2007, p.10) argues that throughout the nineteenth century, approximately 16,000 – 18,000 men and women would be brought into the Empire as slaves annually.

2 This article is part of a doctoral research project that examines how the newly emerging Afro-Turk identity stands in the broader topography of identities in Turkey. Drawing on archival material, in-depth interviews with the Afro-Turk community, and participant observation, I seek to understand the role of race as an integral yet, subtle, element in the making of Turkishness as the dominant ethno-national identity.

as cute, exotic figures, and given names such as "chocolate coloured Turks"[3]. In contemporary representations, the dark colour of their skin is often juxtaposed with the "whiteness" that symbolizes purity, honour and morality[4].

My argument in this article is that the foundation of the ACSO was a turning point in the recent history of the black Turks – although Turks of African origin had already carved out a space for themselves in the topography of identities in Turkey long before the Association was founded[5]. Specifically, I frame the foundation of the Association and its subsequent activities as events through which the members of the community have started gathering together for the first time[6] and re-constructing their collective identity and history. Since 2006, the Association has organized annual events to bring together the members of the community dispersed throughout the region, and to raise awareness about their slave past under the Ottoman Empire (1299-1922)[7] and its contemporary legacy. One important annual event organized by the Association is the Calf Festival, where black Turks can gather and learn about their history and origin. I will elaborate more on this event.

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3 One of the many instances of this narrative is an article by Ö. Y. Merkez entitled "Çikolota Renkli Türkler (Chocolate Coloured Turks)", published in the daily Newspaper, *Sabah* (30 January 2005) http://arsiv.sabah.com.tr/2005/02/03/cp/hob101-20050116-102.html (accessed in June 2019). It is worth noting that Sabah is one of the highest-circulation newspapers in Turkey.

4 One striking example of this chromatic imagination can be found at a newspaper article by Yılmaz Özdil (2016), one of the most widely read columnists in Turkey. After Mustafa Olpak's loss, Özdil wrote on Olpak's ancestors and his achievements in bringing together the black community. The last lines of this piece represent a recurrent chromatic theme in Turkish culture: "He [Olpak] was black, he was the white face [meaning "he was the honorable face/member"] of the homeland/country (*Siyahtı, memleketin yüz akıydı*)". See also Nevola, this issue.

5 Yannis Spyropoulos' (2010) work on the Ottoman Crete points out the sources that reflect on black people's groupings, networks and cultic practices that took place in various times and parts of the Empire. This, to Spyropoulos, is an important marker of how black people living under the Ottoman Empire were not just categorized by the authorities, and identified externally by others, but also formed a collective identity among themselves. This identity, Spyropoulos claims, was based on their "social needs and desire to stay attached to their African cultural origins" (p.34). Spyropoulos' point holds crucial future connections with the motivations behind founding the Afro-Turk Association and organizing the Calf Festivals since 2006.

6 Erdem documents that slaves and freed black slaves were self-organized in the late Ottoman Empire. They had a spiritual leader called Kolbaşı or Godya/Godia (1996, p. 174) and would get together for a spring festival annually (I discuss this festival later in this article). Therefore, by "first" I refer to the public and institutional dimensions of their gatherings within the frame of the foundation of the Afro-Turk Association *after* the Republic of Turkey was founded.

7 The demise of the Ottoman Empire is marked by the abolition of the Sultanate in 1922.

As I will show in this article, what the foundation of the Association initiated is a new identity-formation process among those black Turks acquainted with its activities. It has also played a pivotal role in bringing to the fore a public discussion on the legacy of slavery in the Ottoman Empire. While some historical studies have been devoted to the history of African slavery in the Ottoman Empire (Erdem 1996; Ferguson 2010; Toledano 1998) and to the continued presence of the black Turks in southern Turkey (Durugönül 2003)[8] and in Izmir (Körükmez 2017)[9], research focusing on the legacy of African slavery or on the current experiences of the Turks of African origin remains scarce. Only after the formation of the Association in 2006 have researchers, including myself, begun working on the socio-historical and contemporary legacies of slavery and the current experiences of the black Turks[10]. In this sense, the "rediscovery" of the Afro-Turks' history that followed the increased institutional awareness after 2006 has been the catalyst of their re-identification and re-signification as non-white Turkish citizens (either as Arab, Black or Afro-Turk).

Jenkins (1994) argues that the external processes of social categorizations deeply affect the production and reproduction of social identities. Yet, internal definitions of social groups are equally important while determining these boundaries (Jenkins 1994). Social identity, according to this view, is created at the intersection of internal and external identifications. Follow-

8 Esma Durugönül is one of the first scholars to call for attention to the invisibility of the Turks of African origin, and to open up the field to questions around new historiographies. Her later work (2013) pertains to the people of African origin living in Antalya, the southern part of Turkey in the coast of the Mediterranean.

9 Körükmez's (2017) recent work on Afro-Turks' experiences of discrimination, which is based on extensive field research in Izmir, is one of the few resources available on the topic. Mahir Şaul (2015) presents a panorama of black African presence in Asia Minor, from the sixteenth century Ottoman Empire – both in the form of forced displacements and voluntary travels to or through the Ottoman lands – until the twenty-first century Turkey, in the form of immigration from sub-Saharan Africa. There is also an emerging literature on the black Turks and their history. For example, Ezgi Çakmak (PhD candidate at University of Pennsylvania) is working on the legacy of African slavery in the formation of race relations in the early Turkish Republic. She presented her paper entitled "African Slave or African Servant? a discussion on the forms of free labor in domestic servitude in the late Ottoman Empire" at MESA 2016. Müge Akpınar submitted her MA thesis "*Afro-Türkler'de Kimlik: Temsiliyet, Gelenek ve Kolektif*" [Identity among Afro-Turks: Representation, tradition and collective memory] (2016, Ankara University Institute of Social Sciences). Özgül Özdemir submitted her MA thesis entitled "African Slaves in the 19th century Ottoman Empire" (2017, Boğaziçi University), and continues to work on this topic.

10 I started my field research in the summer of 2014, attending the annual Calf Festival. In this occasion, as well as in previous interactions with Mustafa Olpak, the founder and leader of the ACSO, I observed that the Association leadership was welcoming and open to scholars, researchers and journalists, both local and international, who were willing to write on the community. This openness led me to pursue my research.

ing this theoretical and methodological insight, my approach does not isolate internal identifications – how the members of the community identify themselves – from the external definition imposed by the predominantly white Turkish population and by the national mass-media and popular culture. The significance of this interaction is crystallized in black Turks' experience of the construction of ethnic and racial boundaries. Within the scope of this article, though, I will focus only on how some research participants (re)draw the racial and ethnic boundaries of their community.

The analysis is based on in-depth interviews I collected in Izmir (Turkey) and in the nearby villages from June 2014 to November 2016. During these months, I interviewed 32 people (10 men and 22 women) aged from 25 to 83 years, whom I met through snowball sampling[11]. All interviewees attended at least one of the Association's events and identified themselves as either "Arab", "black" or "Afro-Turk". Most of the interviews were conducted in the participants' house or in some cases in a public space, and lasted between two and four hours. I also attended the events organized by the Afro-Turks Association, including the previously mentioned annual Calf Festivals. During my field research, I also conducted participant observation in events not connected to the Association, to which I was invited by individual interviewees.

This microanalysis enables a grasp of the ways by which people negotiate and construct their identity in their everyday lives and in local political arenas. Among microanalytical approaches to nationalism, Billig's (2005) work on "banal nationalism" looks at how the rhetoric of common sense produces and reproduces nationalism in everyday life. Following a Bourdieusian framework, Billig describes these patterns of social life as habitual and contends that it is through *habitus* that certain elements of culture are *forgotten* or *remembered.* This approach offers an useful heuristic tool to examine the Afro-Turks' collective identity-making processes. Indeed, Afro-Turks draw their cultural and moral boundaries based on their forgotten past and revive their African heritage through the Afro-Turk Association and the events it organizes.

This article is divided into two parts. The first part provides an overview of the historical background of race and slavery under the Ottoman Empire, and offers some insights into the construction of a "hegemonic Turkishness" after the Turkish Republic was founded. The second part explores the vocabulary and self-perceptions of the Turks of African origin. In order to

11 This technique is based on reaching out to prospective interviewees upon referral of the current research participants. I met most of the interviewees at the events organized by the Afro-Turk Association. Yet, through this method, I also met two people who did not identify themselves as belonging to this group. Those two interviews are not presented in this article.

do so, I trace the effects of growing institutional awareness on the ways in which Turks of African origin construct their ethnic and racial boundaries. An examination of the recent shift in the terms that Turks of African origin use to identify themselves and are identified by other people sheds an important light on the complex interplay of different histories: the slavery past of the Ottoman Empire and the ethno-racial dimension of the nation-building of the Turkish Republic or what I call "hegemonic Turkishness". The narratives and experiences of the black Turks reveal "missing" or, at least, understudied dimensions of these histories.

Slavery under the Ottoman Empire and its legacy

The Ottoman Empire was founded in 1299 and lasted until 1922[12]. Although it is difficult to make a general statement on the practice of slavery over seven centuries, some fundamental aspects can be identified. Generally, historians contend that both white and black slavery was practised under Ottoman rule (Toledano 1998; Zilfi 2010; Karamürsel 2017). The history of slavery in the *harem*, in households, in agricultural and in military (*kul*) life has been well documented (Toledano 1998). For instance, *devşirme* was the practice of recruiting Christian youths from the rural areas to be trained in the palace for military and administrative roles and was intended to integrate them into the system of meritocracy (Ahmad 2003). *Devşirme* were considered *kul* – the elite slaves – of the Sultan and had full decision making power over their lives. This practice would bring "on average, a thousand or more boys for government service each year of the more than two hundred years – up to the early eighteenth century" (EI2 in Zilfi 2010, p. 192). Toledano adds that slaves were often socialized into male and female elite roles, in military, administration or in the *harem*. Indeed, while enslaved men were trained for elite roles in the military and in the palace, women were trained for the *harem*. The Caucasus region was the main source of white slaves, along with the Crimea (Toledano 1998, p. 12). According to the historical records, white women slaves, employed "whether for work or pleasure", were priced higher than the men (p. 13). Overall, however, white slaves were in the minority: as Toledano (1998, p. 49) notes, the overwhelming majority of the slave population was in fact African, female and domestic, although the role of the Ottoman Empire in African slavery was rarely mentioned.

12 The first Turkish parliament was founded in 1920, before the Sultanate was abolished in 1922. The Republic of Turkey, the successor state, was officially established in 1923, after the War of Independence.

Slavery was largely based on black female domestic labour. In this sense, Ottoman slavery differed significantly from the Atlantic slave system, since "slaves were not employed in plantations and were frequently manumitted" (Toledano 1998, p. 15)[13]. While a large part of historical scholarship focuses on urban slaves in the Ottoman Empire, there are also works that document the presence of slaves of African origin in agriculture in the late nineteenth century. For instance, Faroqhi (2002) points to the existence of a farm with enslaved Africans in the late-nineteenth century on the Antalya-Alanya coast (southern Turkey), and suggests that this may very well be an indication of continued connections to slave trade from Egypt (p.158).

Ottoman slavery is often described as being an "open slave system" rather than a closed system like the Atlantic slavery, which instead relied on racialized and impermeable social boundaries (Zilfi 2010). As Zilfi writes, in the Ottoman Empire, "resistance in the form of collective rebellion was rare" (p. 99). Manumitted slaves would continue having freeborn children "without lasting taint or stigma" (p. 159). Therefore, it might be argued prejudice against slaves was not as predominant as it was in Western/Atlantic slavery. Considering the fact that slave mothers could give birth to free children in the "Islamic world", Lewis (1990) suggests, any prejudice or hostility was related to racial distinction, not to social distinction. Yet, it is important to remember that slave mothers often become concubines to their masters, and/or gave birth to their free children[14]. Overall, it would be misleading to identify slavery in the Ottoman Empire as "benevolent" or a "soft" system or to assume that Sharia Law would provide enslaved Africans with equal opportunities within the Ottoman society.

Suraiya Faroqhi's *Stories of Ottoman Men and Women* (2002) shows how black and white slaves were inherited as property, sometimes shared among spouses, throughout the centuries of the Ottoman Empire[15]. Slaves were bought and sold and had no control over their lives, or their children's lives[16]. Similarly, Eve Troutt Powell (2012) offers crucial insights into how

13 It is important to emphasize these differences in order not to conflate the Transatlantic Slavery with that of the Ottoman Empire. The Afro-Turk experience inherited a different set of relations from the Ottoman past. There are also, though, important similarities between the two contexts to be highlighted: one of these is the supremacy of whiteness which, in both settings, shaped and reshaped the official discourses.

14 I have not come across any accounts of slave men becoming fathers of free born children. This is of course unexpected in a hetero-patriarchal society based on exploitation of free or enslaved women. We can assume that freedom was hereditary only if it was inherited from the father, not from the mother.

15 Faroqhi looks at estate inventories from variety of locations and centuries throughout the Empire, such as the late fifteenth century Bursa, or nineteenth century Çeşme/Izmir.

16 Both Eve Troutt Powell (2012) and Ehud Toledano (1998) reports cases where enslaved women were raped, forced to abort their babies, or in cases where they give birth, newborns would be taken away from enslaved mothers.

slavery was practiced in the Ottoman elite households in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, through the memoirs of prominent female members of the Ottoman elite in Cairo and in Istanbul. Trout Powell connects past and present when she addresses Mustafa Olpak's (2005) autobiographical piece about how his family was brought from Kenya to the shores of the Aegean Sea (I return to this point later in this article).

Jane Hathaway's (2012) work sheds light on how trans-Saharan slave trade operated under the Ottoman rule in the seventeenth century, specifically with regards to eunuchs' roles in the Palace[17]. Surviving extremely violent castration processes, these eunuchs were considered valuable purchases. Hathaway depicts the life of a prominent black eunuch in Ottoman imperial harem, Beshir Agha (1655-1746), who was appointed as chief eunuch of the Prophet's tomb in Medina (p. 59) and later was recalled to the Ottoman Palace to be appointed as the chief eunuch in the Ottoman Harem, which was one of the most important positions of power in the Palace[18]. Beshir Agha's case provides a good example of how enslaved Africans in the Palace could *sometimes* achieve positions of power. Yet, Hathaway's work also remarks the rarity of Beshir Agha's upward social mobility among other, mostly domestic, sub-Saharan African slaves.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, slavery was gradually abolished as a part of the modernization project of the Ottoman Empire. Hakan Erdem (1996) documents that, during the process of abolition, some freed slaves of African origin remained in Anatolia. The manumitted slaves were taken to state "guesthouses" in a number of cities throughout the Empire where they were enrolled in schools or given employment, for example in domestic jobs or the military. One of the most significant of these guesthouses was in Izmir. As Erdem suggests, the presence of these guesthouses contributed to the growth of the black population who later inter-married with the local populations or amongst themselves and settled in the region. In the case of Izmir, manumitted slaves were also sent to the villages around the city of Aydin where they were employed in agricultural work (Ibidem). Erdem suggests that almost 13,500 manumitted black slaves were brought to the Izmir-Aydın area in the mid-nineteenth century, but there are no official data on the current presence of black Turks living in the Republic (p. 64).

Today, black Turks reside either in villages around Izmir, where they continue to engage in agricultural production, or in the larger cities where they work in a variety of sectors, mostly in blue-collar jobs, in some cases, in

17 Hathaway also emphasizes that only very few boys survived the castration process and that those who did survive suffered from a variety of life-long impairments.

18 Élodie Gaden's (2014) work is an excellent resource on the cultural life of enslaved Africans.

white-collar jobs. Their mother language is Turkish and most of them are (practising or non-practising) Sunni Muslims. The ethnic and racial boundaries of the community have been shaped over the centuries by the experiences of enslavement and the post-emancipation dynamics of life under Ottoman rule.

Wimmer (2008) argues that defining the ethnic-boundaries of the nation was central in the process of transformation from empire to nation states, a process that entailed declaring "their own ethnic background, culture and language as forming the national pot into which everyone else should aspire to melt" (p. 991). Turkish nationalism in the 1930s and the making of a "hegemonic Turkishness" provide a good example. The making of a "hegemonic Turkishness" had been a decades-long process, which had changed significantly over time and space. One fundamental step of its formulation took place when the Turkish state was founded after the World War I. In the early Republican era the "Turkish History Thesis" depicted the Turkish population as belonging to "a great and ancient race", a race with a "long glorious history" (Çağaptay 2004). Similarly, the "Sun Language Theory" asserted that the Turkish language was the main language from which all other human languages were imagined to be derived[19].

The definition of a Turkish "race" has been central to the process of nation building. In the formation years (from 1920 until around 1945, the end of both WWII and the single-party system)[20], the Turkish nation was imagined as "classless" while "shared culture" and, most importantly, a common language were emphasized, and thus fantasized, as "not compatible with the identification of racial or ethnic differences within society" (Alemdaroğlu 2005, p. 71). So, in a sense, the Turkish ideology of modernization and the embedded nationalism lacked a sophisticated theory of racism and a racist system of exclusion, but the establishment of "racial" hierarchies in the early Republican era has had cultural and social implications that are still visible today (Ergin 2008). Racial characteristics and vocabularies in the form of an obsession with skin colour were incorporated into the Turkish project of modernity, centred as it was on the construction of one national and cultural identity in Turkey (Ergin 2008; Çağaptay 2004).

19 For a detailed discussion of the Turkish History Thesis and the Sun Language Theory, see Çağaptay (2004), and for a detailed discussion on the centrality of eugenics in the making of Turkishness, see Toprak (2012) on Afet Inan, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's adopted daughter, and her PhD research *L'Anatolie, le pays de la 'race' turque* (Anatolia, Homeland of the Turkish Race).

20 The formation era can be periodized differently. I take the establishment of the first Turkish parliament in 1920 as the starting point. And in the case of discussions around race, I take the liberty of extending the period to the end of WWII, which marks the decline of interest in eugenics both in Europe, and in Turkey.

The foundation of the Afro-Turks Association (2006)

In 2005, Mustafa Olpak (1953-2016), a former marble worker, published a book titled *Kenya-Crete-Istanbul: Human Biographies from the Slave Coast* (*Kenya-Girit-İstanbul: köle kıyısından insan biyografileri*)[21]. This is an autobiographical account of the story of his grandparents, who were brought from Kenya to Crete, from where they ended up in Turkey in 1923 within the frame of the "Population Exchange programme"[22] between the two countries. Bringing to the fore the past of slavery and forced relocation of his ancestors to Turkey, Olpak's book was an important contribution to the increasing visibility of the history of the Turks of African origin and it paved the way for the foundation of the Association.[23] Indeed, one year later, Olpak founded the ACSO to give visibility to, and recover the history of, the Turks of African origins. When the term "Afro-Turk" was coined to define the Turks of African origin, the Organization's name was shortened in common parlance to "The Afro-Turks' Association".

Olpak summarized his reasons for establishing the Association with his often quoted: "The first generation experiences, the second generation denies, and the third generation researches"[24]. As part of the third generation of black Turks, Olpak felt compelled both to advance his people's self-knowledge and to help them recover their "forgotten" history – a history which had been neglected in the official historiography in Turkey. The foundation of the association was a landmark event in the recent history of the Turks of African origin because for the first time people coming from different parts of Turkey could gather together and learn about their shared history,

21 An abridged format of this book also was translated into French (*Kenya-Crete-Istanbul: Biographie d'une Famille d'esclaves*, Paris: Librairie Özgül, 2006), a translation which enabled Eve Troutt Powell (2012) to include Olpak's narrative in her work *Tell This in My Memory*.

22 The governments of Greece and Turkey signed the "Convention Concerning the Exchange of Greek and Turkish Populations" on 30 January 1923. The Greek population living in the former Ottoman Empire was forced to leave modern Turkey for Greece, and the Turkish population in Greece was forced to move to Turkey. In reality, however, this program was structured as an ethno-religious exchange, rather than an ethnic population exchange. The Karamanlis, for instance, who spoke Turkish as their mother language but belonged to the Orthodox Christian community in Anatolia, were also displaced and black Turks in Crete, as in the case of Olpak's family, were sent across the Aegean because they were Muslims. For a detailed discussion on the Karamanlis and the population exchange see Çağaptay (2004). On the Afro-Cretan population, see Michael Ferguson (2010, pp. 171-195) and Yannis Spyropoulos (2010).

23 Olpak also noted that reading the Turkish translations of Toledano's (1994[1982]) and (2004 [1996]) books motivated him to write the story of his family and to research the history of enslaved peoples under the Ottoman Empire (Ferguson and Kayagil 2017).

24 This quote can also be found in the opening vignette to *Kenya-Crete-Istanbul* (Olpak 2005).

including slavery. This led to a considerably enhanced awareness of their situation and triggered important transformations in their collective identity and sense of selfhood.

When the Association was founded in 2006, they started to organize the Calf festival, a three-day event held annually in late May. Far from being new, this festival revives an ancient tradition among enslaved and emancipated Africans under Ottoman rule. Indeed, according to the extensive oral history research conducted by the History Foundation (*Tarih Vakfı*)[25], the Calf Festival had been celebrated until around the 1950s, although, they argue, it was banned by the Turkish Republic in 1925, when the dervish lodges (*tekke*) and cells (*zaviye*) were also abolished. Closely modelled on the ancient Calf Festival, the new interpretation of this event proposed by the Association of the Afro-Turks explicitly reconnects itself to the past (Ferguson and Kayagil 2017).

Thanks to the Association's activities, the history and continued presence of a black community of slave descendants in Asia Minor has gradually started to gain political and media attention at the national and international levels. For example, after stumbling upon Olpak's (2005) autobiographical book, and finding out about the community, the documentarist Gül Büyükbeşe made her first documentary in 2006 (Baa Baa Black Girl – *Arap kızı camdan bakıyor*) on the enslavement of Africans under the Ottoman Empire and the current lives of their descendants[26]. A second documentary on Afro-Turks' social class position, "Black, African and Turk – *Siyahım, Afrikalıyım, Türküm*", aired in 2010. Both these documentaries were sponsored by the national TV channel *Turkish Radio Television* (TRT), and to this day, they remain an important resource for anyone interested in finding out about the longstanding presence of Turks of African origin and their lives in the villages in Izmir.

In 2008, the History Foundation conducted a study in collaboration with the ACSO, which included extensive oral history research, from which only a booklet was published (Tarih Vakfı [History Foundation], 2008). The increased public visibility gained by the question of the "Afro-Turks" also helped to open up public discussions on the history of slavery and its con-

25 The History Foundation (*Tarih Vakfı*) is a NGO founded in 1991 by Turkish intellectuals and scholars, devoted to historical and social research and the documentation and protection of research materials. Based in Istanbul with a branch in Ankara, it runs projects on topics ranging from nationalism and gender in primary school textbooks to museum studies, it organizes events and publishes periodicals and books such as the Turkish translations of Ehud Toledano's first book in 1994 (originally published in 1982 in English), *Osmanlı Köle Ticareti, 1840-1890* [The Ottoman Slave Trade and Its Suppression, 1840-1890].

26 Mustafa Olpak, scholars Ehud Toledano, Hakan Erdem and Ferhunde Özbay were interviewed for this documentary.

temporary legacies in Turkey. Indeed, it was especially after the formation of the ACSO in 2006 that researchers, including myself, started working on the socio-historical and contemporary aspects of the legacy of slavery and the current experiences of the Afro-Turks.

These dynamics have also contributed to changes in the ways in which the Turks of African origins perceived themselves and their identity. For example, as I will discuss below, the Calf Festival, which has been organized annually since 2006, has provided an important venue for the members of the community to meet and reinforce their identification as Afro-Turks. Following the foundation of the Association, the newly coined term "Afro-Turk" came to replace the term *Arap* with which the black Turks were generally labelled and which they used to define themselves. I will now explore the complex vocabulary through which the black Turks defined themselves and were identified by others, and by which more recently they redrew ethnic and racial boundaries.

Arap, *Zenci* and *siyah*

The Turks of African origins have long defined themselves, and have been defined by others, as *Arap*, *zenci,* or sometimes as *siyah* (black). These categories are laden with historical meanings, which reflect the complex intersecting of external and internal modalities of categorization. An exploration of these vocabularies of identification offers insights into the social history that surrounds these terms. Let me start with the word *Arap*.

The word *Arap*, often accompanied by the adjective "dirty", has been used pejoratively since the Ottoman period (see Deringil 2003) to refer not only to Afro-Turks but also to anybody who is ethnically Arab[27]. *Arap Sabunu* ("Arab Soap"), for instance, is a kind of detergent, which is still widely used in the home and is believed to wash away all the *dirt*. "Arab", with the related expressions that I discuss below, is one of the most common terms used to identify a black person. Arab was used interchangeably in the Ottoman Empire both to refer to a distinct ethnicity and, more importantly for this research, to refer to Muslim Trans-Saharan Africans (Ferguson 2010, 172). In the early republican literature (1920s-1940s), the expression *Arap bacı* ("Arab Sister") was widely used almost as a pseudonym as domestic servants, who were generally described as black women with a "funny accent". *Arap kızı Camdan Bakıyor* is part of a children's rhyme translatable as "the Arab

27 It is not clear how these meanings came be attributed to *Arap*. In this sense, Deringil's (2003) work is telling, since he draws attention to the Ottoman ruling elite's perception of the locals in North Africa. Yet, the origins of this attribution deserve closer attention, possibly dating from long before the end of the Ottoman Empire.

girl is looking out of the window". The Arab girl in this very widespead children's rhyme has possible connections to the Arab sister in the literature. The rhyme, in a sense, is another coded indicator of collective knowledge on the presence of "Arab sisters" in the past.

Another common saying goes *Anladıysam Arap Olayım* (I'll be damned, if I understand), which literally translates as "I'll turn into an Arab, if I understand [the subject matter]"[28]. In this idiomatic expression[29] being Arab and being damned become synonymous. Take the following example to contextualize its meaning. "I promise I'm telling you the truth: if I lie, I shall become an Arab"[30].

It is worth noting here that these idioms and representations are extremely mundane for readers who are familiar with daily lives in Turkey. And it is exactly this banality that I would like to draw up on: black Turks' existence in the Turkish society is acknowledged in everyday life, but *only* through these representations, and *mostly* in demeaning ways. These references demarcate an enduring perception of Turks of African origin as a group that is distinct from the majority – assumed to be white (and/or fascinated with whiteness[31]), Turkish speaking, (Sunni) Muslim community.

Despite its derogatory connotations, the Turks of African origin have long tended to define themselves as "Arabs", rather than "blacks" or "Africans". When I asked the Afro-Turks who took part in my research whether they would define themselves as "Arabs" their answers varied, mostly according to their age. For example, a 59 years old male retired factory worker said:

> We always say we are Arabs, we are of Arabic origin, but now we found out, Arabs are not like us, they are of a different race…Historians told in these panels [held in the Calf Festivals], black people are not Arabs. They are different. But we call ourselves Arabs, it is how the rest of the people talk like that. For instance, when someone shouts "Arab" on the street, we turn around and look at them.

For this interviewee, as for many people of the older generations whom I met, the term "Arab" is a common term by which black Turks are identified and identify themselves, even though it is sometimes used and perceived

28 This saying implies that "Arabness" is a phenotypical difference denoting dark complexion, rather than being an ethnic category.

29 Corresponds to "I'll be damned, if I understand" in English.

30 There are many more discriminatory sayings against Arabs that imply inferiority of dark complexion associated with them. For example, "Arap eli öpmekle dudak kararmaz" (literal translation "kissing the hand of an Arab, won't darken your lips"), which means paying respect to someone (kissing the hand is a sign of respect) who is considered "dirty [as an Arab]" or has bad intentions, won't make you dirty as him/her.

31 For a more detailed discussion on "fascination with whiteness" in the early Republican period, see Ergin (2008).

as an insult, especially on the streets. Mustafa Olpak confirmed that black people continue to identify themselves as "Arabs". As he told me, when he first started to get in touch with black Turks in the rural areas, the villagers opposed his presence in their villages because they did not want to be told that they were of African descent and insisted instead that they were "Arabs, but a little bit darker [than the Turkish majority]"[32].

How can we explain the resistance on the part of some black Turks to accepting Olpak's narrative on their identity and history, and their motivation for continuing to use such a stigmatized word? Although more research needs to be done on how and why the black Turks came to identify themselves as "Arabs", my interview with a woman in a village in the area of Izmir[33] hints at a possible explaination. When I asked her about her nationality and religion, she replied: "We are Turkish, Arab and Muslim. Arabs are *more Muslim and more reliable* [than Turkish] (emphasis added)". As this statement suggests, some black Turks might find it more convenient to identify themselves as Arab because the Arabs are known to be Muslims and to speak the language of the Qur'an. There might also be historical reasons involved. Indeed, at the time of the Ottoman Empire, but also during the early Turkish Republic, it was probably easier for black slave descendants to survive if they foregrounded their identification as Sunni Muslims in contrast with other ethnic and religious minorities. However, speaking Turkish and being Muslim have not prevented black Turks from being subject to stigmatization, and, to colourism[34].

Another term used to identify black Turks, although it is not as widespread as *Arap*, is *zenci,* which literally means "negro"[35]. Local historiographies suggest that the military records of Torbalı indicate that the term *zenci* was used as a surname[36], but we do not know how common this practice was. Curiously, the contemporary usage of the term *zenci* among black Turks seems to be linked to the image of African Americans more than to that of the Turks of African origin; I will return to this later.

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32 Mustafa Olpak, personal communication, Izmir, 4 June 2014.

33 I do not indicate the names of the villages to keep the interviewees anonymous.

34 Körükmez's (2017) research shows skin colour discrimination that Afro-Turks experience. Her findings parallel my own.

35 *Zenci* does not fully correspond to "negro" or to other racial slurs in American or British English. Some people in Turkey claim (including participants of the research) that *zenci* does not even have a pejorative meaning. It is also argued that since *zenci* comes from the Arabic root for *zanj*, which literally means black, it does not denote any pejorative meanings. Yet, one of the major slave revolts of the 9th century in the Middle East is called "Zanj Rebellion", which denotes a semantic relation between slave and Zanj. Also in Turkish, *zenci* is often accompanied by "dirty" (as in the case of *Arap*) or "*köle"* (meaning slave).

36 Yasin Kayış, Nazmi Kızıl and Necat Çetin, *Tarihi ve Coğrafi Yönleriyle Torbalı [Historical and Geographical Aspects of Torbalı* (Torbalı/Izmir: Torbalı Belediyesi Kültür Yayınları, 2013). This book was published by the local Municipality for publicity.

When I asked the older generations of black Turks which terms they would use to define themselves, out of Arab, *zenci* or black, they all said that they would prefer the term Arab since they had got used to it, even though they were quite aware that it can be used as an insult on the street. Two older female interviewees (aged 56 and 83 respectively) stated that they would not feel insulted if a close friend called them "Arab", whereas they felt outraged whenever kids and adults shouted "Arabs" on the street, because, in this latter case, it becomes an insult that highlights a lack or an inability. As a 59 year old interviewee told me:

> Now if I call out somebody who cannot walk properly as "crippled" on the street, wouldn't he be offended by this? He would, of course. Or, if his eyes do not see [meaning visually handicapped], calling him "blind" would definitely offend him. Of course, when we are called that way [Arabs], we take offense. Sometimes we gloss over; sometimes it takes another form [argument].

These examples reveal the contextual and relational uses of the term *Arap*. The usage of the word *zenci*, however, is even more complex, as it emerges from the reflections of my interviewees:

> …we know what we are used to, we know [ourselves] as Arab…I have a close friend for instance [he says] Hey Arab! What's up?... Long time, no see!! But does he have bad intention? No! I know it, because we are close. He comes to my place, dines with us, we get together…But when you say *zenci,* it's different. I might not get mad at someone calling me Arab, but I might react being called *zenci.* Maybe we got used to the former, [*zenci*] sounds more irritating.

As I mentioned above, the pejorative meanings associated with *zenci*, more than with "Arab", could be related to the widespread consumption of American cultural products among both the black Turks and the wider Turkish society. As well as in representations in the national and local media, this transnational cultural flow is crucial in both internal and external identifications. In particular, "American street language", made accessible through Hollywood movies and other televised programmes, is often used as an example while discussing whether or not *zenci* is pejorative. For example, when I asked another female interviewee aged 32 if she thinks that the word *zenci* is pejorative, she said:

> Well, according to TDK [Turkish Language Association], it doesn't seem like [pejorative] much. But if its English version [negro] is banned, probably its Turkish version also has an unfavourable meaning. That's why, generally, I correct it with *siyahi* [black]…yes [elderly chooses to use Arab rather than *zenci*], *Zenci* is generally used by the younger generations who are into basketball and use street language…The word Arab doesn't really correspond fully

> to what we are…*Zenci* is a word that's banned in the US, plus we're not in the States. "Black" (*siyahi*) seems to me a better describing word, like an adjective. But if you ask if it's widespread, it's not.

This interviewee, among others, stressed the influence of the transnational flow of cultural products on how black Turks perceive themselves and their origins. Another woman interviewee, aged 48, said:

> The concept of *zenci*, as I said, I don't think they [people who call us *zenci*] say it consciously. The way it is perceived as bad is about its English translation, its unfavourable meaning. That's maybe why there is that [negative] meaning. Because I know people with *zenci* as their surname. Most probably it was given during the Surname Act[37]. If it really had a bad connotation, they wouldn't get this surname, I think. Nobody would want to get this [*zenci*] as a surname, if it was interpreted negatively.

In the words of this interviewee, too, the term *zenci* is imagined as having a link with the word "negro" in English and with the American pop culture and its global influence. The ways in which people evoke the West to make sense of, define and distinguish their experiences is also mirrored by the ways they discuss racism. As I delve deeper in my broader project, I work out that the existence of racism is generally denied and racism is often described as "an ill of the West". In the mainstream discourses in Turkey, indeed, any African-Americans are portrayed as suffering from racism, whereas "Arabs" are very well treated in Turkey. In a sense, this mainstream perception is reflected in the interviewee's understanding of the word *zenci*.

The black Turks' everyday experiences also reveal another aspect of the influence of American cultural flow: they are often identified as Western tourists of African origin, presumably African-American. Most of my interviewees said that the people they encounter on the streets of Izmir tend to speak to them in English, assuming that they are African-Americans and not locals. In a sense, African-Americans are less "strange" to people in a cosmopolitan area than black Turks because, arguably, of two structural elements. One is the immense cultural influence of the Hollywood film and American music industries in Turkey and the other is the predominant, yet silent, emphasis on whiteness in the representation of Turkish identity and,

37 The Surname Act (*Soyadı Kanunu*) of 1934 required Turkish citizens to adopt Turkish names and pick last names that would be fixed and hereditary. Article 3 of the Surname Act "forbade names which are related to military rand and civil officialdom, to tribes and foreign races and ethnicities" as well as surnames that were not suited to customs or which are disgusting or ridiculous" (Türköz 2007, p. 894). Türköz presents a detailed analysis of how the Surname Act played a crucial role in secularization efforts, at the peak of the nation-building process in 1930s.

related to this, the under-representation of the black Turks in the mainstream national media.

When I asked the interviewees what they thought of the "Afro-Turk Association" and whether it had changed their self-perceptions, the majority said that now they are keen on affirming their African ancestry, rather than calling themselves "Arab". Most participants mention similar instances where they feel more "confident" in terms of identifying themselves publicly, in their everyday interactions, as Afro-Turks. Whereas initially, at the beginning of my field research, the older generations were less vocal about identifying themselves as Afro-Turks, three years later I worked out the extent to which the Association played a role in introducing the term "Afro-Turk" both among the older and the younger generations. On the Day of Commemoration (13 November 2016), organized after the loss of Mustafa Olpak, Afro-Turk attendants, young and old, expressed their gratitude to Olpak for "reminding [them] of [their] colour". One female participant said: "While before I wanted to forget about my colour, he [Olpak] made it possible for me to get back to myself/find my essence, my roots [Özüme dönmemi sağladı]."

Her comment points out the power of invisibilization of Afro-Turks in the mainstream discourse. Black Turks and their history have been omitted from the dominant discourse in Turkey to the point that they have become accustomed *not* to being *seen*, or at "best" perceived as "chocolate coloured". This participant's will to *forget* her own colour parallels the *forgetfulness* of the majority of the Turkish society mentioned in the beginning of this article. Her comment also acknowledges Mustafa Olpak and the work of the Association as a turning point in the way she perceives herself, after being *reminded* of her origins.

Since the mainstream discourse in Turkey neglects the existence of racism, this woman "wanted to *forget* about [her] colour" (*emphasis* added). In a society that claims to be "colour blind" or at least "benevolent enough" to perceive the Afro-Turks as "chocolate coloured", it was Mustafa Olpak and the work of the Association, that reminded them of *who they are*.

Conclusion

The narratives of the black Turks I met tell us that they have long been aware that they occupy an awkward position in the national cartography of identity since they did not belong to the hegemonic depictions of Turkishness that takes whiteness as *given*. As one of the interviewees suggested, despite their desire to *forget* about their skin-colour, they could not identify themselves with this hegemonic formulation of Turkish citizenship and identity. Their narratives and experiences, thus, shed light on a dimension of the current ethnic identities in Turkey which has often remained understudied in

academic scholarship on the topic: the way whiteness is imagined as a subtle, and yet an indispensable, element in the making of "Turkishness". They force us to consider the extent to which traces of a seemingly archaic mode of thinking on race and nation-making – from the 1930s – persists today.

The Afro-Turks' awareness of not belonging to (or being excluded from) mainstream "Turkishness", however, has not engendered a collective mobilization against the status quo. Unlike the blacks in Europe and in the United States in particular, who have long mobilized against white supremacy to denounce the overwhelming racism and racial discrimination that they experience, in Turkey the existence of colour prejudices and racial discrimination against black Turks is generally denied. This denial parallels the scarcity of public discussions on the legacy of slavery. This is, perhaps, because the predominant representations depicting racism as "an illness" peculiar to the West and implying that race and racism are irrelevant in Turkey have been deeply influential. This has led the black Turks to develop separate, alternative ways to identify themselves with the Turkish Republic. For example, until very recently, they have mostly identified themselves as "Arabs". This is not only because they were identified as Arabs by the majority of the society, but also because, despite its potential derogatory meaning, it foregrounded the common belonging to Islam. Most of the interviewees thought, conversely, that the term *zenci* (negro) did not fit them because of its derogatory connotation in the English language. Since there were not many black figures in the local mainstream media with whom black Turks could identify themselves[38], I have highlighted the important role of American pop culture, particularly black pop figures and movie stars, in changing the ways in which they perceive themselves. This is another example of how black Turks have carved out a space for themselves: in this case, the identification and cultural creativity made possible by global popular culture.

In general, however, before the Africans' Culture and Solidarity Organization was founded in 2006, the ethnic and racial boundaries of the black community were mostly defined by external labels and definitions of their identity, which due to space restrictions, could not be discussed in-depth in this article. In this sense, the establishment of the Association marked the beginning of a new process. Not only did it raise public and institutional awareness about the longstanding presence and history of a black population in Turkey but it also initiated a new dynamic of social identity formation. With the creation of the Association, indeed, an increasing number of people have begun, after initial resistance and rejection, to identify themselves with the newly coined term "Afro-Turk" and with the narrative it entails on their shared history and identity. Changing a key feature of their collective

38 I would like to thank Professor Anders Neergaard for pointing out to this *lack* of representation, and its connections to the making of hegemonic national identities.

identity, the Association's emphasis on an African origin instead of an Arab one, has thus contributed to changing how black Turks perceive their origin and history. Today, black people in Turkey are increasingly confident and proudly explain who they are and where their ancestors came from.

The case of the Turks of African origin offers important insights into the diverse relational and contextual making of race and ethnicity in Turkey. Central to the process of (re)making of racial and ethnic boundaries within this community of Afro-Turks have been the experience of enslavement and emancipation under the Ottoman Empire and, equally important, the nationalist discourses on race and ethnicity in the early Republican period. I have briefly noted how the establishment of a "hegemonic Turkishness" – centred on the purity of the Turkish language, whiteness and culture – has contributed to their invisibility in official historiography and to their marginalization within the national topography of identities. The history of slavery under the Ottoman Empire and the imagination of Turkishness in the formation of the Turkish Republic have left important legacies which have continued to affect the lives of the black Turks. It is only by making reference to this history that we can understand the experience of these black people in contemporary Turkey. Further research and theorization are needed, however, to enhance our understanding of the contemporary dynamics of identity construction among the Afro-Turk community in light of the historical construction of hegemonic Turkishness as the dominant ethno-national identity. This article is just one step in this direction.

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