



2nd GLOBAL CONFERENCE on PSYCHOLOGY RESEARCHES, 28-29, November 2014

## Relations among Various Ethnicities in Today's Modern Turkey

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### Abstract

The Ottoman State, the predecessor of Turkey, was a cosmopolitan society where many different people lived in total harmony until late nationalistic currents, mainly provoked from outside, had their impact. Along the course of history, Anatolia had been a melting pot and today's Turks resemble their ancestors in their immense tolerance of ethnical differences. Though such differences are admitted as reflected in children's puns and tongue-twisters, they are never ever horrified at. What gives the cohesion of the country is an esprit des corps based on a traditional culture, which in turn derives its solidity from the roots of a rich history as well as a common fate for all committed to live here.

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Peer-review under responsibility of Academic World Research and Education Center.

*Keywords:* Ethnicity; race; cosmopolitan; culture; history; puns of children

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### 1. Introduction: A "Prologue" Deriving on History

Today's Turkish Republic is the continuation of the former Ottoman State. It can be said that the Ottoman Empire was the equivalent in the Old continents of what the United States are in the New World, as far as the cosmopolitan populations are concerned. For the Ottomans the driving force of expansion was Islam. Various ethnicities conglomerated around the Moslem-Turkish nucleus along the course of territorial conquests. In parallel to this development, the Protestant-Anglo-Saxon core in America attracted many people from different ethnical origins and even many different races (1) mainly due to economical reasons as well as democratic/liberal ideals.

The Ottoman mind was not preoccupied with racial/ethnic issues in the least. In fact, the Ottomans did not even differentiate Blacks (Negroes) from Arabs. (As Yagmur Atsiz once mentioned in an article); it is known that the Ottomans called blacks "Arabs" and they called genuine Arabs "White-Arabs" (Akarab).

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As Timur (November 1986: 117) puts it (by reference to Dumont); in late Ottomans, Turkishism currents only took the form of a political program and became the instrument of the par-Germen movement; while secret agents of German militarism like Parvus, became the advisors of Turkishists. In the end, the Ottoman Army was literally confined to German commanders (2).

Indeed, in his autobiographical novel *Close Surveillance* (Buyuk Gozalti), Cetin Altan talks about his own childhood and his Pasha grand father, who had been an Ottoman cavalry officer during the First World War. One day the grandpa's former German friends visit the house. The little boy watches the old man fascinated, as he speaks fluent German with his friends. He had been trained in Germany in his youth. Before the arrival of the guests, the grandfather searches for the tiny statue of the former German emperor, Kaiser, to reanimate the good old memories and to please the visitors. As he can not locate it, the whole family frenetically participate in the search to help him. Finally they find it somewhere in the big toilet-room. The pious grandma had dumped the ritually-unclean damned thing [a three-dimensional representation of a living being; moreover that of an unbeliever's!] in there and had forgotten all about it!

## **2. Islam as a Good Mixer and Equalizer**

While the Ottomans distinguished their Christian subjects (reaya), they kind of “lumped together” all their Moslem subjects. Those were Albanians, Arabs, Persians (Acem), Bosnians, Laz, Pomaks, Circassians, Georgians, Chechens, “Gypsies” (Kiptis), Zazas, Kurds, Turkmens, Dadash, Yoruks (literally “Nomad”), Tahtaci (literally “wood-craftsman”), Dagli (literally “mountaineer”), Gacals, Nogays, Kazaks, Ozbeks, Azeris and so forth.

Even a former non-Moslem, upon embracing Islam, immediately accessed a level equal to the born Moslems. One might as well say that converts were praised more highly than the born Moslems. After all, inducing conversions into Islam was the driving force of the conquests, that is, the expansions in the beginnings.

For the Ottomans nationality played no role whatsoever. He who was a Moslem, was [in a sense] Turkish. Greeks and Slavs, once they became Moslems, could rise to the status of commandants. Viziers or other high dignitaries (Stuwe, 1974:131).

## **3. The Anatolian Peninsula, a Passageway for Many Tribes**

Using a metaphor from Physics, the Turk of the Republic of today is like the resultant force of various component forces. Those component forces themselves are represented mainly by the above-mentioned Moslem ethnicities. The historical and cultural transactions between the Moslem and the non-Moslem Ottoman societies had also their play in this social formation process. The many contributions by the non-Moslem subjects of the Sultans can never be denied. Eminent artists, poets and composers of Turkish music are to be named among the non-Moslems of the Ottoman and Republican times.

Today's ethnical composition of Turkey more or less parallels the German Nation's “ingredients” like Prussians, Bavarians, Frank(en), Hes, Aleman, Fritz, Palatinates etc., all of whom are vestiges of very old tribes; as Atsız (March 3; 1999) registers.

Similarly; Iberians, Celts, Romans before Christ; Anglo-Saxons of Germanic origin and French-speaking-Norseman from Scandinavia later on came to England. There they all mixed up to form today's English nation. Chaucer was the first great writer to write in English instead of French or Latin or Saxon (paraphrased from Schindler and Goldman, 1964:96).

## **4. A Similar Fate in Near History**

As the Ottoman State shrank in territory (3); the population got more and more homogenized, at least as far as religion and native tongue goes. Finally, migration waves, either voluntary or compelled by the prevailing conditions or in accordance with the signed armistices and treaties (4), further contributed to the homogenization of the population. (The sad story of all immigrants is interesting.

Let us listen to the female chronicle writer Kirikkanat (November 10, 1996): Years passed. The woman [she, the daughter of an officer and the granddaughter of an officer, she, who is the descendant of an all-military family]

came to lean to differentiate the Greek from the Roumi [Byzantian-Anatolian-Greek]. One night in Madrid she watched the movie *Rebetiko* in Spanish on television. For the first time, she cried with hiccups for the sort of the Roumis, who got extracted from the Anatolian earth and thrown into the peninsula of Peloponez. Those Roumis were expelled from Turkey for being ‘bastards of Greeks’ and were confronted in Greeks as ‘Turkish seeds’. They established Izmir-and-İstanbul-neighborhoods in Peloponez and they nurtured their own culture there.

Indeed, the Treaty of Lausanne recognizes only the non-Moslems (Armenians, Greeks and Jews) in Turkey as minorities. Of course the legal definition of citizenship includes them. The Turkish Constitution considers all citizens Turks and forbids all sorts of discrimination (by gender, creed, age, race, ethnical origin etc.).

“In the census of 1965, 90 % of the population (28.3 million out of a total of 31.4 million) (Lewis, 1974: 212, 216) declared Turkish to be their mother tongue. [There being no more such statistics], this should still be the upper limit of the population...in the country population today, estimated in 1987 at 52 million (OECD, 1988, cover)” (Mango, 1993: 347).

## 5. An Equally-Shared Social History

The present ethnicities, whatever their ancient origins might be, are all melted down and intermingled in coil-like/spiral, intricate, non-attachable dispersions all over the country. All citizens are united with bonds of cultural and deeply-historical fraternity.

Many intellectuals compare the ethnical structure of Turkey to a mosaic; but, journalist Yagmur Atsiz, in one of his articles, more reasonably compares it to the art of marbling, which is achieved by mixing various colors in a bowl of water and then fixing them onto a piece of paper. None of those colors can be removed from the paper without destroying the paper.

In his work *Türk Kimliği*, Guvenc (March 1996: 361) offers us a full script copy of the last will of Nihat Atsiz, written at the date of May 4, 1941 and addressed to his son Yagmur, then at the age of one and a half. On his death testimony the senior Atsiz lists a number of nations as Turks’ enemies. He classifies them into three: Historical enemies, present enemies and the future enemies. Then the list goes on with a number of ethnic groups, most of whom are Moslem, and those people are labeled as the inner (!) enemies of Turks! The testimony ends in a romantic style: To cope with so many enemies, one must make good preparations [my son]; so, help you God!

As Gudkow (July-August 1997: 67) says so; “phobias are not isolated reactions to a particular national or ethnic group. As a rule, expression of hostility toward one nationality intersects with negativism or fear in regard to one or more others”.

The baby-Yagmur grew up into an intellectual adult and he obviously did not take his late father’s words into heart. Just on the contrary, the junior Atsiz is a wonderful man of immense realism, tolerance and understanding in his interpretation of nationalism. As he writes in an article dated June 11, 1999; that if one were to associate all Armenians with the violent fanatical anti-Turkish organization of 1970’s who assassinated Turkish diplomats; then one could easily fall into the error of associating all Kurds with the separatist terrorist Kurdish organization active in Southeastern Anatolia.

As he opposes some so-called patriots, he addresses them in the following words: Do you know, you patriots, that Armenians are a legacy (yadigar) to us from Fatih the Conquerer? If an Armenian commits a crime, do make him pay for it! But not because of his being an Armenian; because he had committed a crime! Please, pull yourselves together.

## 6. Honorable, Peace-Loving Folks

In Turkey in people’s minds ethnical origins are recognized but not horrified at or discriminated against in a reciprocal manner by the main bulk of the population (Extremists in that respect do exist but they are few in number). Rather, ethnic origins are usually mentioned merely as modifying adjectives in grammar, just to designate groups or individuals.

In the early years of the Republic, a law was accepted to use family names for the first time in history. Formerly nicknames were commonly employed to differentiate individuals with same names. The tradition still lingers in

small communities. Some of those nicknames are of ethnical nature like Albanian-Vehbi, Pomak-Sami, Bosnian-Riza, Emigrant-Mehmet (here the word “muhacir”, meaning “emigrant” is collapsed into a shorter version, macir) etc.

Such ethnical nicknames, let alone being a stigma, may on the contrary, be regarded as a source of pride by its carrier. In fact, some other nicknames, in comparison, may be very degrading adjectives or may simply refer to some physical deformities. Example are: Topal (lame), Kor (blind, usually meaning “one-eyed”), Kel (bald), Pinti (miser, stingy), Deli (crazy), Alchak (low, designating shortness but also insinuating lowness of character) or even Tek Tashak (with only one testicle, one-balled).

The home-cities were sometimes part of the official titles throughout the Ottoman History. Examples are: Damat İbrahim Pasha from Nevşehir, Ali Pasha from Choru, Mohammed Ali Pasha from Kavala, Niyazi Bey from Resne, Hamdi Bey from Manastir.

A person may naturally be proud of his ethnical origins, without feeling contempt for other ethnicities. Indeed; the philosophical poet of the late-Ottoman period, Rıza Tevfik, expresses his pride in his ethnical origins in two stanzas in a challenging style: “My father was an Albanian and my mother a Circassian / Be it known to everyone!” (“Babam Arnavut’tu, anam Çerkes / Bunu boyle bilsin herkes!”).

## 7. Children are more “Transparent” than Adults

It should also be noted that ethnical consciousness is almost none in children, weak if any in young people (draftsmen are young men at the age of 20 to 22) and relatively stronger in old people. For young people many other attributes (honesty, physical appearance, friendship, trustworthiness etc.) are much more important traits. Indeed, all over the world, love affairs are known to occur, where the hero and the heroine come from different ethnical groups or even from hostile ethnical groups. Words of a classical Turkish song expresses this theme: “Do not bang me against stone [walls]! / I love a Circassian girl! / I’ll marry a Circassian girl!” (“Vurma beni tashtan tasha! / Alacagim Çerkes kizi! / Seviyorum Çerkes kizi!”).

It should also be noted that, paradoxically, children act out their little ethnical consciousness in a more conspicuous manner, while adults usually conceal their stronger inner thoughts and negative attitudes! Children are a bit cruel in that respect. Their acting out tendencies do not pertain to ethnical awareness alone, of course. The child is egocentric in nature (my toy, my mother, my room etc.). Concepts like empathy and altruism have not yet matured in his personality. He can, in a “transparent” manner, make his thoughts known and resort to mockery, just for the fun of it. His mockery can be directed towards another’s poverty, different and thus conceivably wrong accent or physical deficiency. Children do like to embarrass one another! This does not necessarily jeopardize their friendship ties, either. Mutual mockery and ritual insults may even seal friendships as a sign/proof of sincerity and closeness:

“In 1970’s a common teasing pun/tongue-twister was circulating among İstanbulite-youths. When two close friends encountered, it was an aptitude to rehearse/recite before his ‘opponent’ the playful formula: Is your pa set free from the jail?! Tell your ma not to come to laundry-washing tomorrow! (‘Baban hapisten Cikti mi?! Annene soyle, yarin chamashira gelmesin!’)” (Caya 1992: xii).

In accordance with such puerile word games, a child may tease a “gypsy” child by reciting the formula: “Hey gypsy gyp gyp! / On his back are lice and lice! / One spoonful of liquid yoghourt/ Renders the next day a holiday!” (“Chingene chit chit! / Arkasi bit bit! / Bir kashik ayran/ Sabası [sabahu] bayram!”).

Tartar-looking boys and girls have their share of such mockeries: “He / she is a Tartar/ And throws shit out of a harbor!” (“Tatar / iskeleden bok atar!”).

A blond boy (rarely seen in Turkey) can not easily escape from the mischievous attacks of his peers: “Look here, you blondy! / Where is the woman [you promised] for me?” (“Sari! / Hani bana kari?”).

A homeless tramp’s situation is mentioned in a somewhat merciless manner in a tongue-twister; which is recited with a certain melody in the evenings, on the verge of quitting street games and returning home: “Let the married go home! / Let the villager go to his village! / And whoever has no home,/ Should just enter a mouse-hole!” (“Eвли evine! / koylu koyune! / Kimin evi yoksa,/ Sichan deligine!”).

As it can be seen, such formulas invariably employ rhymes. Turks are poetic people; they adore poetry.

Puns do not necessarily contain insults, either: “It is raining!/ It is flooding!/ And the Arabic girl/ is looking out of the window!” (“Yagmur yagiyor/ Seller akiyor / Arap kizi/ camdan bakiyor!”). “Look here Arab! / Turn the merry-go-round! / Girls wear nylon socks / And men drink alcohol!” (“Arabi Arabi!/ dondur dolabi!/ Kizlar giyer naylon chorabi / Erkekler icer raki sharabi!”). (In the latter pun pronunciation of some words are made to resemble the Arabic language).

If a boy might on occasion dare to address a minority boy with an ugly heavy pun like “Since you are an Armenian/ You should offer yourself/ Without being asked to do so!” (“Madem ki Ermenisin / Istemedem vermelisin!”) or “Since you are a Rumi/ Let it [my prick]/ Stay inside [you]!” (“Madem ki Rumsun / Birak da ichinde dursun!”).

Then what will happen? His prey will automatically retaliate by starting a repartee (atishma edebiyati, as the traditional saz- poets (bard, rhapsode) used to like to engage in). His counter-attack can be made with a specific pun: “The Rumi was created by Allah! / And your ma’s c\*nt was bled by the mules!” (“Rum’u Allah yaratmish! / Ananin \*mini katirlar kanatmish!”). Or, the reply might be a more general one like: “We got over those words! / And we exploded your ma’s c\*nt!” (“O laflari atlattik! / Ananin \*mini patlattik!”) or “You couldn’t make it fit sideways! / Mount on a female camel now! / Your pa brought some carrots / Insert them into your ma!” (“Uyduramadın yancigina! / Bin devenin kancigina! / Baban havuch getirmish / Sok ananin \*mcigina!”).

## 8. Concluding Remarks: A Country Where Harmony Prevails

The crushing majority of Turkish citizens do not bother to inquire into ethnical differences, if any. As Baltacıoğlu ([renewed print]1994: 52) says; race is a biological reality whereas nationality is a social reality; a moral formation whose transmitter is social heredity, in other words, the traditions.

Erkal (1994: 23) formulates the same idea in more detail: A nation is not a geographical, racial and voluntary set of people; but a nation is a group of people functionally and culturally integrated above the biological arguments. Nationalization is a process above the feeling of identity belonging to a particular tribe or to a community.

“Turkish culture, it is said, has absorbed the compound heritage of the Assyrian, Hittite, Sumerian, Persian, Greek, Roman, Byzantine, and Turkic cultures; and, for the past nine or ten centuries, the Turks have been synthesizing them” (Bisbee 1951: 150).

“The population of Turkey is the product of its history. Anatolia has been crossed and re-crossed by the armies of a hundred invaders, and behind them has been left the slit of many races and many cultures... In fact, anyone traveling in Turkey will be struck by the variety of racial (5) types, especially as he tends to meet the educated classes where the greatest racial variety is naturally to be found” (Ward 1942: 14)

Historians write that Mustafa Kemâl after the great victory on the way to Izmir [1922] said: ‘we got the revenge of Troy from the Greeks’. So, he accepted Troy [which had been conquered by the wooden horse trick in ancient times] as an Anatolian civilization (Bardakci October 4, 1998).

As Mustafa Kemâl formulated it in the most appropriate style: “How happy is he who says that he is a Turk!” [not he who necessarily is a Turk]. (“Ne mutlu Turk’um diyene!”).

## Notes

1) “From a biological standpoint, a race is one of a number of populations of the species *Homo Sapiens* which differs from the other populations in the frequency of one or more genes. The three basic human populations are Mongoloid, Negroid and Caucasoid divisions, corresponding very roughly to what are usually thought of as the yellow, black and white races. So far as it is known, there is no evidence that the genes which differentiate these races of man have any relationship to innate mental capacities” (Phillips 1969: 195).

2) In the period 1917-1918 we even see *Kaymakam Bretling* as the commandant of *Kuleli İdadisi* (From the list of commandants of that military school, taken from *Kuleli Askeri Lisesi 153. Donem Diploma ve Komutanlık Devir-Teslim Toreni* [Pamphlet], 2 Temmuz [July] 1999; Cengelkoy, İstanbul). (*Kaymakam* was a rank approximating today’s lieutenant-colonel).

3) If the Ottomans entered anywhere by force, they could only prolong their stay thanks to good administration (until the decadence started). This is just what happened in the *Balkans*. As *Songeon* (1914: 248) puts it: *From the fifteenth*

century on and until some time in the seventeenth century, the Sultans treated pretty humanly the raïas (Christians). They let them practice their faith and engage in commerce, artisanship/industry and agriculture. The right of property and personal liberty were generally respected. The taxes were not very demanding. Courts were distributing justice well. In brief, the Turks, who had a lot of goodness and honesty, were not mistreating the beaten.

4) My maternal grandparents also came to Turkey in accordance with the Armistice of *Mudros*. My grandmother was carrying her unique child (their first son, my uncle), at the time a two-year-old boy, on her lap. At the border the little boy pointed to the nearest *Greek* sentry and murmured: “Infidel!” Then he pushed his tiny finger against his own throat to simulate a cutting gesture and said: “I will cut that infidel!”. Before his horrified parents could hush him down, the Greek soldier had seen all that! But, a mature-minded man, he only smiled with a philosophical shaking of his head. S.C.

5) “*Race*” being a much broader category, here, the author should have used “*ethnicity*” as a more appropriate term. S.C.

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