

This volume puts together papers given at the *Balkan Cultural Identities* Conference, the second of the kind, hosted by Ovidius University, Constanta, October 14-17, 2004. The conference gathered academics, researchers and students from Bulgaria, Turkey, Croatia, Romania, and also from the United States of America, Italy, Portugal, Finland, and Great Britain. The papers selected for this volume illustrate the major topics of the conference (identity between self and other, centre and margin, mainstream and alternative currents, metropolis and colony) with a view to challenging the current theories and stereotypical images about the Balkans and to evincing the area's variety and plurality in terms of culture, language and literature.

The editors

## BALKAN CULTURAL IDENTITIES



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EDITED BY:

ADINA CIUGUREANU MIHAELA IRIMIA EDUARD V

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## THE UNBELOVED. A CASE OF "WRONG" IDENTITY IN OTTOMAN AND CONTEMPORARY TURKEY

Luminita Munteanu  
University of Bucharest

When speaking about "Balkan identities", one is often inclined to draw a very clear demarcation line between the Ottoman Turks and the other peoples inhabiting the same region, namely between Turks and non-Turks and, especially, between Muslims and non-Muslims, who are mainly thought to be Christians. Being so much preoccupied with this traditional opposition, we actually forget that neither the Turks in the Ottoman Empire, as well as those inhabiting the peninsula in the old ages, nor the Balkan people constituted homogeneous, monolithic groups. On the contrary, they were very different from the point of view of their ethnical, cultural, and religious structure, or even background.

To put it plainly and, thus, to be more specific, we should cast a glance at the history of the Ottoman dynasty itself, and notice its brilliant evolution from the stage of a small, essentially nomadic, later on semi-nomadic, provincial structure – in fact, a border principality, during the Seljukid rule in Asia Minor –, to that of a state and subsequently an empire which extended not only to Asia Minor or to some Near-Eastern regions, but also to the Balkans. What should be stressed upon in this fantastic story is the fact that the initial Ottoman building laid upon a traditional tribal structure, which brought together the adepts of Osmân – the legendary founding father of the future dynasty. Nothing seemed to announce at the very beginning this spectacular evolution. The small group led by Osmân, which came from Iranian Hurasân at an uncertain time, and interfered with other Turkish tribes, settled down in ancient Bithynia, in a territory assigned to it by the Anatolian Seljukids, in exchange of some military services; its main task was to defend the Byzantine border and push away the undesirable groups of wandering soldiers, tribes, dervishes, landless people, and so on.

The very name of the future dynastic structure, *Osmânî*, indicates that its nucleus effectively consisted of the followers of Osmân, which were of pure Turkish origin at first. We also know that the father of Osmân was a certain Ertoğrul, and we may suppose that his son inherited some of his traditional prerogatives as chief of a Turkic clan. All these events happened in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century; for lack of contemporary documents, and consequently of more detailed information, we cannot speculate more about the connections between the ruling dynasty of the Seljukids and the proto-Ottomans. Then, in 1240, the events suddenly got out of control, because of the Mongol invasion in Asia Minor. The Mongols imposed their principles over a large part of Anatolia, but never succeeded in dominating its whole territory; in fact,



they were more interested in the conquest and its immediate economic advantages, than in the long-term administration of the newly subjugated lands. In exchange, the Seljukid dynasty, which grew weaker and weaker, and which was at the same time confronted with a huge rebellion of its own nomadic subjects, finished by completely vanishing.

The Ottomans seized this favorable occasion to fill the political void and impose themselves upon some other independent Turkic principalities which flourished at the same period in Anatolia. By acting as a winner, they became attractive not only for other Turkic (or Turkish) groups, but even for a number of Christian communities, given the dissatisfaction of the latter with the Byzantine fiscal politics. All these people joined the raising, much promising state, which gradually lost its exclusively ethnical, even tribal basis, to change into a purely political configuration. This remarkable achievement, together with an active territorial conquest, enlarging the prior principality, led, among other things, to significant changes in the life style of the ancient tribesmen: they increasingly decided or, sometimes, were forced to settle down, to change their habits and main occupations, to administrate some ancient Byzantine and Seljukid urban districts, to assume new responsibilities and, finally, to build up a new civilization. Naturally, this was a long lasting process, involving several generations, and a progressive, many times convulsive transition from the nomadic patterns of life to the sedentary ones. For example, the son of Osmân, Orhân, who ruled the young Ottoman state for about thirty eight years (1324-1362?) and may be considered as its real, not legendary, founder, decided to establish his headquarters in Brusa (the first Ottoman capital city, captured in 1326, and usually known by the Turks as *yeşil Bursa*, "the green Brusa"), yet continuing to spend his summer days in a tent outside the town. During this dim times, the Ottomans eventually adopted a new identity, chiefly based on the peculiar values of any sedentary civilization, and definitely renounced to their tribal roots.

Under these dramatic circumstances, a clear opposition emerged between the Ottoman, imperial, cosmopolite centre and the Turkish periphery, the members of which lived mainly in the vast Anatolian land. In this way, the conservative, outdated, inconvenient country people turned into a kind of scapegoat of their own kinsmen. They were perceived as the "idiots of the family", shamefully betraying the moral and cultural values of the settled society. "The peasants", either of Turkish race or not, contradicted the standard portrayal of the average "good" Ottoman, not necessarily Turk, but preferably Muslim and Sunnite, settled, having a definite occupation and, finally, a *status*, regularly paying his taxes, easy to control by the authorities. Thus, they were considered with disdain by the urban classes, especially by the inhabitants of Istanbul. As a practical example, it is worthy to be noticed that in the Ottoman official records (e. g. the registers called *mühimme*, which means "of important affairs"), as well as in the chronicles, they were usually referred to as *etrâk bî-idrâk*, "Turks without discernment", *etrâk-î nâ-pâk*, "impure/dirty/unclean Turks", *etrâk-î*

*müteğallibe*, "tyrannical/violent Turks" or *etrâk-î hâricî / havâric*, "seceding Turks", while the others were, simply, Ottomans – Ottoman citizens.

So, within the heart of the Ottoman empire, there was an unambiguous boundary line between the savage, uncivilized, ancillary, once or still nomadic Turk, who incarnated a "wrong", blamed identity, and was regarded as alienated, because of his way of life, his irregular Islamic faith, his different customs, and the "suitable", appropriate Ottoman. A great gulf was fixed between them; as the sociologist Doğu Ergil remarks with good reason, "In Turkey, for a vast body of peasants, central government until the 1930's remained as an extraneous entity imposed on them by alien forces. Conscription, tax collection, and occasional public services were the only occasions of contact" (Ergil 85).

The great majority of these undesirable country people originated from Turkish tribes and was speaking Turkish dialects. The problem they set to the Ottomans acquired soon a political aspect, as many of them refused to accept the identity pattern of the centre and chose to defend their traditional values by becoming subversive and/or rebelling against the new masters. Always regarded as a dangerous Trojan horse, they were periodically reduced to order, but they never renounced to their patriarchal ideals, and remained unruly until the last days of the Empire. Their contemporary descendants, who are more or less sedentary, continue to maintain a much-tensed relation with the Turkish state, which, on the other hand, treats them with certain distrust; historical misadventures, clichés, and deceptive presuppositions also alter their relation with large groups of the Turkish population.

Some of these groups are, however, more famous or, let us say so, "special", than the others. Once globally named *Kızılbaş*, "red caps", because of the red headgears worn by some of them, they are known in contemporary Turkey as *Alevî*, "worshippers of 'Alî" (the son-in-law and the cousin of Muhammad, the prophet of Islam) and are usually labelled as the representatives of a Turkish form of Islamic heterodoxy. Why this apparently surprising sectarian identification? For we may also speak of another major change of identity, which took place on Ottoman soil, and seems to have been much more ingenious than the Ottoman one: the transformation of an ensemble of Turkish, nomadic or semi-nomadic tribes into a dervish order, with two main branches and several groups. In fact, the former tribesmen embodied a sub-branch of a well-known Ottoman mystical order, the *Bektaşî*, which played an outstanding role in the spiritual life of the Turks, not only in Anatolia or Rumelia, but also in the Balkan region. The *Kızılbaş/Alevî* subjects of the sultan professed a form of alternative Islam, which undoubtedly had recovered some ancient, pre-Islamic religious beliefs (most of them of shamanic origin), and was later influenced by several Islamic heterodoxies (though this last term is somehow controversial in Islamic context). Moreover, they were influenced by the imamite/Twelve Shiites, which set up a theocratic state in Iran, at the very beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The involvement of the *Kızılbaş* in the political confrontation opposing the Ottomans to the Iranian Safavids (of Turkish origin) worsened their situation, and so they began to



be pursued not only as heretics, but also as traitors. From the point of view of the Ottoman sultans, who were generally smooth, moderate Muslims and realistic rulers, this was an explosive, unpredictable combination, which had to be firmly eradicated. This opinion was, actually, shared by the Sunnite majority of the Ottoman population.

We might conclude that the initial chasm between the settled Ottomans and the Turkish nomadic tribes developed, in the course of time, into a progressively deeper estrangement of the two main groups of population, into a brutal severance of the two different types of values and cultures they symbolized. This separation showed up not only at the level of the relationship between the rural *Alevî* sectarians and the Sunnites, but also at that of the connection between the *Alevî*-s and the mainly urban *Bektaşî*-s – the major components of the mystical order we are dealing with. The dissociation from the Others was based on a perfect, never denied reciprocity, as we are merely obliged to notice while comparing the labels the two camps continue to apply to each other. For example, in the region of Elâzığ (eastern Anatolia), the *Alevî*-s are named by the Sunnites *sırtı sarî*, “the yellow backed” or *sırtı kırmızı*, “the red backed”. In the region of Ortaca (Muğla), the Sunnites call themselves *Türk*, “Turks”, to distinguish their community from the *Alevî*-s, who are, in their turn, of obvious Turkish origin. In the same region of Muğla, but also in some other regions of Anatolia, the *Alevî*-s are named *Türrik* (an Ottoman inheritance), and “strangers” – *yabancı* (Türkdoğan 38, 68, 111). There also are regions in Turkey where the *Alevî*-s are insulting the Sunnites by using the term *yezîd* (from the name of the Umayyad caliph they consider guilty of the death of Husayn, the son of ‘Alî and the nephew of Muhammad, in the desert of Kerbalâ’, in Iraq; thus, this name actually means “murderer”) or *yobaz*, “sectarian, intolerant”, while the orthodox Muslims are designating them by the name *Kızılbaş*, “red heads”, which is nowadays considered injurious. The *Alevî*-s also refer to the Sunnite Muslims in humiliating words, such as *Muaviye’nin piçleri*, “the bastards of Mu’âviyya (the Umayyad caliph, rival of ‘Alî and father of the earlier mentioned Yazid)”, *sakallılar*, “the bearded ones”, *namazlılar*, “those with the prayer”, *yatuk*, “the idle ones” etc. (Türkdoğan 340-341).

The accusations brought by the Sunnite Muslims against the *Alevî* sectarians are very diverse and undoubtedly emphasize the ancestral fear of any human being confronted with the unknown, with a reality that denies the pattern of his own identity. They often reflect very common presuppositions, instilled into individuals starting with their childhood and tacitly accepted by an authoritarian, paternalistic, traditionally shaped educational system. These accusations are many a time irrational, absurd, if not ridiculous. For example: the sectarians are dirty, because they do not perform their daily ablutions, as all the Muslims are supposed to do, and even when performing them, they use stones or sand instead of water, which is strongly recommended by the canonic law; their aliments are “unclean”, impure, impossible to eat, because they are dirty; they use to spit (!) on the food; their houses emanate a particular smell, because they do not perform the ritual ablutions, thus being inevitably and always dirty; they organize disgusting orgies during their ritual

reunions, which take place in great secret, at night (this supposed moment of total sexual liberty is designed by the Sunnites by the words *mum söndü*, “the candle was extinguished”); they bury their dead like the “pagans” – in other words, dressed, and not shrouded; their communities, as well as their reunions, are closed to the others; they do not admit the uninitiated among them on the occasion of their main rituals; they neglect the five daily prayers of the orthodox Muslims and do not fast during the sacred month of *Ramadan*; they do not perform the ritual pilgrimage to Mecca, and besides, they replace it with other pilgrimages to some Shiite sanctuaries or local shrines; they never eat rabbit meat, but pork and cat; they openly drink alcohol, even during their rituals; they have incestuous intercourses, are immoral or amoral and materialistic; they have replaced Muhammad with his cousin and son-in-law, ‘Alî, even deifying sometimes the latter; they are hidden, dangerous agnostics, etc. Many of the suspicions or accusations itemized above may be also found, in the same virulent form, in the letters or sermons of Christian theologians, who had harshly condemned heresies and anticlerical movements in their space of reference, some centuries ago. Once again, there is nothing new under the sun.

To conclude, we may say that, in spite of certain political, not very convincing efforts, the dialogue between the religious majority and the *Alevî* minority, which probably represents about 20 % of the population, remains rather difficult in Turkey. Each camp is much inclined to consider the other one in excessive and unfavorable, if not hostile terms. Both camps deliver radical discourses, which are meant to emphasize not the common substratum, but the dissimilarity between “us and the others”. “The other” is always seen as a historical enemy, even as a traitor of the national, authentic Turkish identity. From this point of view, the complex implications of which are clear enough, Turkey remains divided, anxious, and schizoid. The ancient conflict is, for the time being, kept in stand-by, but there is much discontent behind this apparent silence, behind this secular disjunction, especially in some regions of the country, having a tragical memory. Nevertheless, owing to the requirements of the European integration, some new evolutions are expected, even in this delicate field of the Turkish society.

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