

# The Way the Ethnicity Matters are Regarded in Public, in Turkey



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Submission: January 10, 2017; Published: February 15, 2017

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## Abstract

The Ottoman State, the predecessor of Turkey, was a cosmopolitan society in which many different people lived in total harmony until recent nationalistic sentiments, mainly provoked from outside, had their impact. Throughout, Anatolia had been a melting pot and today's Turks resemble their ancestors in their immense tolerance of ethnic differences. Though such differences are admitted as reflected in children's puns and tongue-twisters, they are not seen as pejorative. What gives the country unity is an esprit des corps based on an integrated traditional culture, which in turn derives its solidarity from the roots of a rich history as well as a common fate for all committed to live peaceably in Turkey.

**Keywords:** Ethnicity; Race; Cosmopolitan; Culture; History; Puns of children

## Introduction

### A "Prologue" based on historical roots

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 ethnic origins and even many different races mainly due to economic advantages as well as democratic and liberal ideals. The Ottoman mind was not preoccupied with racial and ethnic issues in the least. In fact, the Ottomans did not even differentiate Blacks (Negroes) from Arabs. (As columnist Yağmur Atsız once mentioned in an article); it is known that the Ottomans called blacks "Arabs" and they called genuine Arabs "White-Arabs" (*Akarab*). As Timur [1] puts it (by reference to Dumont); in late Ottoman state, the current of Turkism only took the form of a political program and became the instrument of the pan-Germanic movement; while secret agents of German militarism like Parvus, became the advisors of Turkist/*turquiste* intellectuals.

In the end, the Ottoman Army was literally led by German commanders. Indeed, in his autobiographical novel *Close Surveillance* (original title: *BüyükGözaltı*), Ç. Altan mentions about his own childhood and his Pasha grand-father, who had been an Ottoman cavalry officer during the First World War. One day the grandfather'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 rekindle the good old memories and to please the visitors. As he cannot locate it, the whole family frenetically participates in the search to help him. Finally; they find it somewhere in the large bathroom. The zealous grandmother 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!

### Religion as the unifying cement

While the Ottomans distinguished their Christian subjects (*reaya*), they "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*, *Kazhaks*, *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 [2].

### Asia-minor: A real melting pot

Using a metaphor from physics, the Turk of the Republic of today is like the resultant vector of various component forces. Those component forces themselves are represented mainly by the above-mentioned Moslem ethnicities. The historical and cultural interactions 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 ethnic composition of Turkey more or less corresponds to the German Nation's "ingredients" like Prussians, Bavarians, Franks, Hess, Aleman, Fritz, Palatinate etc., all of whom are vestiges of very old tribes; as Atsız [3] notes. Similarly; Iberians, Celts, Romans in B.C. eras; Anglo-Saxons of Germanic origin and French-speaking Norseman from Scandinavia later on, flooded to England. There they all assimilated to form today's English nation. Chaucer was the first great writer to write in English instead of French or Latin or Saxon [4].

### Becoming more homogeneous via shared experiences

As the Ottoman State shrank in territory the population became more and more homogeneous, 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, further contributed to the homogenization of the population. According to writer Kırıkkanat [5]: 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 Roum [*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 Roums, who got extracted from the Anatolian earth and thrown into the peninsula of Peloponnese peninsula. Those Roums were expelled from Turkey for being 'bastards of Greeks' and were confronted in Greece as 'Turkish seeds'. They established İzmir-and-Istanbul-neighborhoods in Peloponnese 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, ethnic origin etc.). Mango [6] provides the following information: In the census of 1965, 90 % of the population (28.3 million out of a total of 31.4 million) (G. 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).

### Common history dictates being cohesive

The present ethnicities, whatever their ancient origins might be, are all mixed and intermingled in coil-like/spiral, intricate, non-attachable conclaves all over the country. All citizens are united with bonds of cultural and deeply-historical fraternity. Many intellectuals compare the ethnic structure of Turkey to a mosaic; but, columnist Y. Atsız, 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 titled *TürkKimliği* [Turk Identity], Güvenç [7] offers us a full script copy of the last will of Nihat Atsız, written at the date of May 4, 1941 and addressed to his son Yağmur, then at the age of one and a half. In his death testimony, senior Atsız 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! "Phobias are not isolated reactions to a particular national or ethnic group.

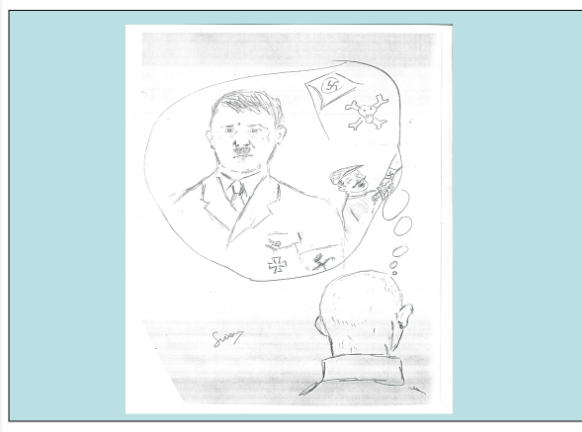
As a rule, expression of hostility toward one nationality intersects with negativism or fear in regard to one or more others" [8]. Baby-Yağmur grew up, became an intellectual and obviously did not take his late father's words into heart. Just on the contrary; junior Atsız is a wonderful man of immense realism, tolerance and understanding in his interpretation of nationalism. He affirms (1999); that if one were to associate all Armenians with the violent fanatical anti-Turkish organization of 1970s, 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 Yağmur [9] opposes some so-called patriots, he addresses them in the following words: Do you know, you patriots, that Armenians are a legacy to us from Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror? If an Armenian commits a crime, do make him pay for it! Not merely because of his being an Armenian; but because he had committed a crime! Please, all of you! Do pull yourselves together!

### Anatolians are peaceful folks

In Turkey in people's minds ethnic origins are recognized but not discriminated against in a reciprocal manner by the majority 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. All foreigners who live in Turkey are regarded as respectable guests, too (Figures 1 & 2). 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 ethnic origin added before the proper names like Albanian-Vehbi, Pomak-Sami, Bosnian-Riza, Immigrant-Mehmet (here the word “*muhacir*”, meaning “immigrant” is collapsed into a shorter version, *macir*). Such ethnic nicknames, let alone being a stigma, may on the contrary, be regarded as a source of pride by its bearer. In fact, some other

nicknames, in comparison, may be very degrading adjectives or may simply refer to some physical deformities. Examples are: *Topal* (lame), *Kör* (blind, usually meaning “one-eyed” / *borgne*), *Kel* (bald), *Pinti* (miser, stingy), *Deli* (crazy), *Alçak* (low, designating shortness but also insinuating lowness of character) or even *TekTaşak* (with only one testicle, single-balled).



**Figures 1 & 2:** Let alone any xenophobia likes that of the radical skinheads in Germany, the Turkish population displays liking, admiration and respect towards foreigners. In a term-paper-research conducted at a mechanical plant in central Anatolia some years ago, it turned out that Turkish laborers had very positive attitudes towards western expatriate experts working with them (Illustrations by the author).

The home-cities were sometimes part of the official titles throughout the Ottoman History. Examples are: *Damat* [sultan’s son-in-law] Ibrahim Pasha from Nevşehir (Province), Ali Pasha from Çorlu, Muhammed Ali Pasha from Kavala, Niyazi Bey from Resne (a young-Turk, a leader of the Union and Progress Movement), Hamdi Bey from Manastir (Hamdi Bey from Manastir was an Ottoman telegraphist in Istanbul, who got registered in history. When the invading British army raided a Gendarmerie post and killed sixteen soldiers, Hamdi communicated the sad news to Ankara, center of national struggle, during the War of Independence (Until this incident, the British, despite being an occupation force, were keen on refraining from open brutal force against the Turks, within the city)) (in Macedonia). A person may naturally be proud of his ethnic origins, without feeling contempt for other ethnicities. Indeed; the philosophical poet of the later Ottoman period, Rıza Tevfik, expresses his pride in his ethnic 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 Çerkez / Bunuböylebilsin herkes!*”).

### The minor: More candid than the adult

It should also be noted that ethnic consciousness is almost none in children, weak if any in young people (conscripted plain-soldiers are young men between the ages 20 and 22) and relatively more prevalent in older individuals. 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, in which the hero and the heroine come from different

ethnic groups or even from hostile ethnic 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!” (“*Vurmabenitaştantaşa! / Alacağım Çerkekızı! / Seviyorum Çerkekızı!*”). It should also be noted that, paradoxically, children act out their little ethnic 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 does not pertain to ethnic 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 met, it was an acceptable talent 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! (“*Babanhapistençiktımı? / Annenesöyle, yarın çamaşır ağelmesin!*”) [10]. 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 yoghurt

/ Renders the next day a holiday!" ("Çingeneçitçit / Arkası bit bit / Bir kaşıqayran / 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 / iskeledenbokatar!"). A blond boy (rarely seen in Turkey) can't so easily escape from the mischievous attacks of his peers: "Look here, you blondy! / Where is the woman [you promised] for me?" ("Sarı! / Hani banakarı?"). 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!" ("Evlievine! / Köylüköyüne / Kimineviyoksa, / Sıçandeliğine!"). 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 the window!" ("Yağmuryağıyor! / Seller akıyor! / Arap kız / camdan bakıyor!"). "Look here Arab! / Turn the merry-go-round! / Girls wear nylon socks / and men drink alcohol!" ("Arabi Arabi! / Döndürdolabi! / Kızlargiyernaylonçorabi / Erkekleriçerrakişarabi!"). (In the latter pun, pronunciations 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!" ("Mademki Ermenisin / Istemedenvermelisin!") or "Since you are a Roumi / Let it [my prick] / Stay inside [you]!" ("Mademki Rumsun / Birak da içindedursun!"). Then what will happen? His prey will automatically retaliate by starting a repartee (*atışma edebiyatı*, as the traditional saz-poets (bard, rhapsode masters) used to like to engage in). His counter-attack can be made with a specific pun: "The Roumi was created by Allah-Almighty! / and your ma's c\*nt was bled by the mules!" ("Rum'u Allah yaratmış! / Ananın \*mini katırlarkanatmış!"). Or, the reply might be a more general one like: "We got over those words! / and we exploded your ma's c\*nt!" ("O laflarıatlattık! / Ananın \*mını patlattık!") Or "You couldn't make it fit sideways! / Mount on a female camel now! / Your pa brought some carrots / Insert them into your ma!" ("Uyduramadınyancığın! / Bin deveninkancığın! / Babanhavuçgetirmiş / Sokananın \*mcığın!").

### Conclusion

The overwhelming majority of Turkish citizens do not bother to inquire into ethnic differences, if any. In the wording of Baltacıoğlu ([renewed print] 1994: 52); 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 [11] expressed the same idea in some 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" [12].

"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 types, especially as he tends to meet the educated classes where the greatest racial variety is naturally to be found" [13]. Historians write that Mustafa Kemâl after the great victory on the way to İzmir / Smyrna [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 [14]. 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'umdiyene!").

### Related notes

I. "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" [15].

II. In the period 1917-1918 we even see Kaymakam Bretling [a German officer] as the commandant of Kuleli İdadisi (From the list of commandants of that military school, taken from *Kuleli Askeri Lisesi* 153 [16]. *Dönem Diploma ve Komutanlık Devir-Teslim Toreni* [Pamphlet], 2 Temmuz; Çengelköy, İstanbul). (Kaymakam is today a sous-prefet / junior governor in public administration but it was a sheer military rank in later era Ottoman army, approximating today's lieutenant-colonel).

III. 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 [17] puts it: From the fifteenth century on, and until certain times in the seventeenth century; the Sultans treated the raïas (Christian-subjects) pretty humanely. 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. (Figures 3 & 4).



**Figures 3 & 4:** Turkey's political history is totally free of incidents like Nazi concentration camps or former *Ku-Klux-Klan* activities in the southern states of America (illustrations by the author).

IV. 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.Ç.

V. "Race" being a much broader category, here, the author should have used "ethnicity" as a more appropriate term. S.Ç.

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