Between Nation and Diaspora: Afro-Turk Identity in the Age of Liberalism

Brittany White
Rochester, New York

Bachelor of Arts, Temple University, 2012

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In 2005, Mustafa Olpak, a marble worker from Ayvalık, Turkey, and founder of the African Culture and Solidarity Society, published *Kenya, Crete, Istanbul: Human Biographies from the Slave Coast*. It was a family history that grappled with historic silences regarding the African Ottoman slave trade, its legacy, and the critical need for Afro-Turk communities to educate themselves and the world about their past. As the title reveals, Olpak's ancestors were kidnapped and brought to Crete, where they were enslaved by a wealthy Cretan family. Later, they were forced to migrate to Turkey after the fall of the Ottoman Empire as a part of the 1923 Greek-Turkish population exchange, which stipulated that Muslims (Turks) living in Greece leave their home and be resettled in regions across Turkey. Conversely, this meant that all the Greek Orthodox Christians be moved and relocated to Greece. This process was a haphazard and chaotic affair, leaving many families with intergenerational trauma and fractured histories.

Kenya, Crete, Istanbul was groundbreaking because it addressed Turkey's history of multiculturalism, the African slave trade, slavery, and anti-Blackness—which have all been historically taboo topics within Turkish national discourse. But one passage—where Olpak tells the dramatic story of how his family became Turkish citizens—stands out.

After Olpak's grandparents were manumitted, their former owners left them without any money and suggested that they make their way to the port of Rethymno to catch a boat to Ayvalık, Turkey, where there was now a significant Cretan Muslim community. Without money to purchase a boat ticket, his grandparents devised a plan. They concealed their newborn baby—who hadn't even been given a name yet—in a carpet. They snuck on a boat headed to Cunda, an island just off the coast of Ayvalık and the former home of many ethnic Greeks who had also been forced to relocate. Upon arrival in Cunda, they were subject to a quarantine period and

afterward, Olpak's family was settled in Ayvalık, where they were given a plot land plot with a grove of olive trees (likely the former property of relocated Greeks). According to Olpak, once his family was settled in the nearby town, Ayvalık, his grandparents decided to name the baby—his mother—Kemale, after Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the founder of modern Turkey and the central figure in Turkish national lore.[1]

The conversion moment of becoming Turkish is integral to Olpak's narrative and an example of the tension within the newly-reclaimed Afro-Turk identity. For any ethnic or religious minority living in Turkey, publicly discussing or celebrating your "non-Turkish" identity is risky at best, but historically, it has also proven to be dangerous. After establishing the Republic of Turkey in 1923, the early republican government worked to create a narrative that would distance itself from the Ottoman past. Under the leadership of Ataturk, the newly formed Turkish state-mandated a series of reforms that aimed to create a monolithic Turkish identity around which all citizens could unite and identify. Some sweeping changes included sartorial reforms, which mandated Western European-style clothing. National holidays were created to help form a collective national identity and memory. Most famously, there was a shift from using the Ottoman Arabic script to the Latin alphabet in 1928. The Kemalist government also attempted to purge the Turkish language of its Persian and Arabic root words in favor of those with Turkic roots.[2] Through a wide-reaching campaign, the new republican government worked to present the Ottoman imperial past as irredeemably backward and destined to fail due to irreversible political decline—and in no small part due to the multi-ethnic, multi-religious nature of its society.

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[1] Mustafa Olpak*, Kenya-Girit-İstanbul: Köle Kıyısından İnsan Biyografileri* (Istanbul: Ozan Yayincilik, 2006), 31-33
[2] Hale Yilmaz, *Becoming Turkish: Nationalist Reforms and Cultural Negotiations in Early Republican Turkey, 1923-1945* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2013), 23.

The early republican government presented a vision of Turkishness as forward-facing and compatible with Western modernity. These ideas were intertwined with racial conceptions of whiteness common to the interwar period. Early republican nationalist ideology was mobilized to create a "white European Turkish identity." Much of the discourse centered on notions of "protecting" and "improving" the Turkish race, echoing the eugenicist discourses of the period. This framework positioned Turks as a white race and at the pinnacle of a civilizational and racial hierarchy. In practice, ethnoreligious minorities who expressed any cultural difference were actively subjected to a restrictive policy that policed their identities. For example, in 1925, Sufi orders were abolished—their property and endowments seized by the government. Languages other than Turkish were increasingly relegated to the private sphere. And in the southeast, Kurdish people faced violent suppression by the state. From the early twentieth century onward, public discourse celebrating cultural difference was essentially taboo; and expression of "non-Turkish" identities continued to be oppressed through state rhetoric, legal frameworks, and violence.[3] This was a radical shift away from the multicultural rhetoric of Ottomanism and the 1908 constitutional revolution that, in many ways, laid the political foundations of modern Turkey.[4]

In this context, Olpak's interlude describing how his mother was named after the proverbial father of the nation is highly symbolic and was common practice for early republican Turkish families.[5] Olpak was taking a risk by talking about slavery and encouraging others to

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[3] Murat Ergin, *Is the Turk a White Man?: Race and Modernity in the Making of Turkish Identity* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2018), 99, 107, 108.
[4] Taglia, Stefano. "Ottomanism Then and Now: Historical and Contemporary Meanings: An Introduction." Die Welt Des Islams 56, no. 3/4 (2016): 279–89. http://www.jstor.org/stable/24893994.
[5] Szurek, Emmanuel. "Appeler les Turcs par leur nom. Le nationalisme patronymique dans la Turquie des années 1930." Revue d'histoire moderne & contemporaine 60–2, no. 2 (2013): 18–37. https://doi.org/10.3917/rhmc.602.0018.

celebrate their African roots and racial identity. As such, he was walking a tightrope, and where possible, he chooses to emphasize that despite exploring his Black identity, he is still a proud Turkish citizen. This is just one example of how Afro-Turks have learned to delicately navigate the liberalist opening in the public discourse and an ever-present nationalist sentiment that tends to silence "non-Turkish" identities and perspectives.

In many ways, Afro-Turks were perfectly positioned to be the model minority at this moment. Unlike other minority groups, they represent a very small portion of the population; they're Muslim and Turkish speaking and so are not perceived as a threat to Turkish identity. And through the experience of the Afro-Turks, we find an example of how interwar-era nationalism can be reconciled with an age of multicultural liberalism.

An opening in the national discourse

In the early 2000s, Turkey's courtship with the European Union began to shift Turkish domestic policy and social climate, particularly regarding ethnic and religious minority rights and expression. Because the EU mandates that member states work to protect minority rights, from 1998-2005, the commission overseeing this ascension process for Turkey issued eight reports assessing the status of minority rights and religious freedom. Consequently, Turkey signed several related treaties as a part of this harmonization process. In 2002, the government passed a reform package that consisted of sweeping constitutional amendments. Some of these reforms included the possibility of broadcasting radio and television programs in the Kurdish language and a law that allowed non-Muslim community foundations to acquire and sell

property. Finally, in 2003, The Labor Code was amended to prohibit discrimination based on race, language, and religion.[6]

While Turkey's domestic policy was being transformed by the EU courtship, its foreign policy shifted and reoriented itself towards Africa. In 2005—the same year Mustafa Olpak published his book *Kenya-Girit-Istanbul*—the Justice and Development Party (AKP) announced that it would be the "Year of Africa." In 2008, it hosted the first-ever Turkey-Africa Cooperation Summit in Istanbul with 50 African states' participation to lay the groundwork for bilateral trade agreements. State agencies like the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA), the Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD), and Red Crescent (Kızılay) were mobilized to deepen relationships with African governments by providing humanitarian and economic assistance. Additionally, the Turkish government increased the number of embassies on the continent from 12 to 42 to strengthen inter-governmental relations, particularly immigration and security concerns.[7]

These foreign and domestic sociopolitical undercurrents helped create conditions where the publishing of Olpak's book was not only possible but well received. From that point forward, Mustafa Olpak and the newly founded Afro-Turk organization worked to revive old Ottoman-era cultural practices—most notably Dana Bayramı, the spring "calf festival." This festival was central to Afro-Ottoman life and culture in places like Izmir and Crete and even has been documented in the Balkans. In Izmir, the festival would start on May 8 and last for three weeks. During the first week, called Dellal Bayramı, or the Declaration Festival, community members

[6] SULE TOKTAS and BULENT ARAS, "The EU and Minority Rights in Turkey," *Political Science Quarterly* 124, no. 4 (2009): 697–720.

[7] "Turkey-Africa Relations: Setbacks Amidst Advances | Africa Up Close," accessed March 26, 2022, https://africaupclose.wilsoncenter.org/turkey-africa-relations-setbacks-amidst-advances/; "The Scalar Politics of Turkey's Pivot to Africa," *Project on Middle East Political Science* (blog), June 16, 2020, https://pomeps.org/the-scalar-politics-of-turkeys-pivot-to-africa.

would come together and march through the streets of Izmir's African neighborhoods. The procession was headed by a *kolbaşı*, a traditional spiritual leader and priestess. As they passed through the streets of Ottoman Izmir, they collected donations, which are presumed to have been used to cover the cost of the festival. During the second week, Pestamal Bayramı, participants gathered atop Kadifekale—an imposing stone castle with sweeping views of the city. There, they would decorate the calf purchased with the money collected the previous week in pink cloth and parade it through the streets.[8]

This was no somber procession—participants played gourd instruments and drums, rang bells, and sang out in African languages. It was a lively and celebratory atmosphere. Finally, during the third week—Dana Bayramı proper—celebrations reached their zenith. One group of participants would go to the tomb of Yusuf Dede (St. Polycarp) to prepare the calf for sacrifice atop Kadifekale. Once the kolbaşı performed the ritual sacrifice, participants dressed in the best clothing would mark themselves with the calf blood. Afterward, the calf was cooked and served with chickpeas and rice, followed by a whole night of boisterous celebration.[9]

Dana Bayramı was not unlike other Ottoman spring festivals. During the late Ottoman period, Izmir boasted an ethnically and religiously diverse population—with Greeks, Armenians, and Jews all celebrating their heritage through public performances of culture and tradition. Levantines—famous for their stately mansions in the Izmir suburb of Bornova—and the city's Greek community celebrated Tataula Carnival. This was a centuries-old, pre-Lenten festival where the participants would take to the street—often in drunken procession—wearing masks, dancing, singing, and playing traditional instruments. After Lent, of course, came Easter, one of

[8] Michael Ferguson, "Enslaved and Emancipated Africans on Crete," in *Race and Slavery in the Middle East*, eds. Terrance Walz and Kenneth M. Cuno (New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2011), 180.
[9] Ibid.

the holiest days on the Christian calendar and another important public celebration orthodox Christian community of Izmir. The traditional celebration of Easter also included large processions, ringing church bells, and shooting guns into the air.[10]

These public religious and cultural celebrations were, in part, a way for these minority communities to assert their identities under Ottoman Muslim rule—and Africans living in Izmir were very much a part of this practice. Engaging in these public celebrations was a way for them to "assert and define 'African space' within the city of Izmir."[11] With the revival of the festival in the 2000s, Afro-Turks are still engaging in this practice and attempting to fill the void left by the assimilationist and nationalist policies established in the early republican period. It has been an effective way for the community to say, "We still exist here."

However, in the late Ottoman and early republican eras, increasing control of cultural and religious expression deeply affected these practices. Africans living in Izmir were prohibited from worshipping at the tomb of Yusuf Dede and celebrating the annual Calf Festival. After the heavy-handed social, political, and economic reforms of the early republican period, the festival eventually fell out of practice. But, revived by the Afro-Turk community in the mid-2000s, Dana Bayramı is, once again, a central part of Afro-Turk life and culture in Izmir. The festival lasts three days instead of three weeks in its reanimated state. Instead of a live calf for sacrifice, members of the community use a life-sized wooden calf made especially for the twenty-first-century rendition of the festival. It still maintains the same celebratory nature—with dancing, music, and curious spectators gathering to watch the procession—and members of the Afro-Turk organization invite local officials and media outlets to document the day's events.

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[10] Ferguson. "The African Presence in Late Ottoman Izmir and Beyond," 176-177.
[11] Ibid.

The “Afro-Turk movement,” as it has been dubbed, has sought to include academics and media presence from the very start. For example, while *Kenya, Crete, Istanbul* was the product of Olpak’s personal and family history, it was also the product of scholarly research. Olpak fills in historical gaps in this family’s story with well-regarded scholars of Ottoman slavery, namely Ehud Toledano and Hakan Erdem. The involvement of these scholars also helped the movement garner attention from the UNESCO Slave Route Project—an international initiative meant to support innovative projects on slavery, abolition, and resistance.

Its inclusion into the UNESCO project had a domino effect, bringing even more attention to their work. In 2006, the Turkish state television channel, TRT, produced a documentary titled *Arap Kızı Camdan Bakıyor,* which explores the history of African slavery through the lens of Olpak’s family story and prominently featured commentary from Toledano and Erdem. With funds from the European Union, the Tarih Vakfı was able to conduct the large-scale oral history project, “Voices from a Silent Past: Afro-Turks Past and Present.” Since then, each year, the Calf Festival program has featured presentations from Turkish, European, and American scholars. The inclusion of academics in this project and financial support from national and international organizations has been an integral component of how the Afro-Turk identity has been reconstructed. It seemed that state and non-governmental agencies were all clamoring to support the Afro-Turk organization.[12] In the words of Langston Hughes, it “was a period when the Negro was in vogue.” But had not always been the case.

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[12] Ferguson. “The African Presence in Late Ottoman Izmir and Beyond,” 204-208.

Perceptions of Blackness in late Ottoman society

"*No matter how much the Calf Festival, special only to our city, has been criticized, this custom continues yet again. Dispute everything that has been written about this odd and ridiculous tradition, there remains no other way to smash the people's ignorance*."

These words were published in a May 1894 issue of the Izmir newspaper, *Hizmet.* While certainly indicative of how Ottoman society viewed the African community, it also hints at something else: the African community of Izmir was active—and their cultural practices were a visible part of Ottoman society. Though this newspaper article's tone is disparaging, emancipated Africans celebrated the Calf Festival unfettered by the state for much of the nineteenth century. Local authorities had even been known the raise money for the festival, drawing in considerable crowds of non-African Ottomans, which the *Hizmet* article mentions: "We cannot avoid being amazed and pained at the fact that four or five thousand of our sober-minded (*akıllı uslu*) white people (*beyaz ahalimiz*) take part in the festival…."[13]

The article uses derogatory language denoting Blackness—like the word *zenci*—in addition to employing adjectives that turn the African participants of the Calf Festival into an ill-regarded "other." Uncivilized (*vahşi*), ignorant (*cahil*), ill-mannered (*biedebane*), funny (*tuhaf*), and odd (*garip*) are all words used to describe the Africans celebrating their festival. Though there is not much in the literature that speaks to racialization and racial formation processes in the late Ottoman period, just in this article, we still get a glimpse of how Blackness was framed

[13] Ehud R. Toledano, *As if Silent and Absent: Bonds of Enslavement in the Islamic Middle East* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 237.

and perceived in public discourse by the Ottoman elite.[14] It also demonstrates that, while by no means on equal terms, emancipated Africans were already becoming incorporated into a public civic identity during the late Ottoman period.

While the Ottoman government never abolished the practice of slaveholding wholesale, the African slave trade was outlawed in 1857. It was common for enslaved Africans to escape their owners and seek refuge in a foreign embassy to petition for their freedom during this time. Others petitioned the Ottoman courts and sued for their freedom, often claiming abuse. There were countless cases where enslaved Africans petitioning the Ottoman government—either on their own or through British interlocutors—successfully obtained their freedom. The Ottoman government had several ways of resettling Africans into the community. One of the most notable examples of this is the "Izmir Plan," where the Ottoman state set up guest houses in and around the Izmir region to provide shelter for recently emancipated Africans from across the empire. The city had been strategically chosen because it was a port city, easily accessible to ships, and the surrounding region was rapidly growing and in need of laborers. As a part of this plan, the state placed emancipated African men in vocational schools and military bands and women in Ottoman households and paid domestic workers.[15]

This influx of freed African people into Izmir and the surrounding Aegean region was cause for anxiety on the part of the Ottoman authorities—and public celebrations of their culture like the Calf Festival exacerbated that anxiety. The fact that non-African Ottomans were known to participate in the celebration by raising money for the activities or joining the processions themselves was even more cause for alarm for some. Not too long after the aforementioned newspaper article was published, the governor of Izmir, Hasan Fehmi Pasha, officially prohibited

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[14] Ibid.

[15] Ferguson. "The African Presence in Late Ottoman Izmir and Beyond," 83-86.

the celebration. Additionally, since part of these celebrations involved devotional trances, the festival was linked to Sufi spiritual practices. Since the late 1800s, the Ottoman government had become increasingly restrictive of Sufi orders, as they were seen as a threat to the Ottoman authority. And if we look outside of the Ottoman context, we see how authorities across geographies were concerned with policing African people and identities in their respective post-abolition eras.[16]

For example, like late Ottoman Izmir, nineteenth-century New Orleans had a sizeable enslaved and emancipated African community. According to Code Noir, a holdover from the French colonial period, enslaved Africans were allowed to take Sundays off from their work. But in 1817—not long after the United States government purchased Louisiana from France—the New Orleanian government passed laws that restricted gatherings in Congo Square, where freed and enslaved Africans had been allowed to gather on Sundays during the French and Spanish colonial eras. The people who gathered in the square would set up a market to sell their wares, sing, dance, and play music—especially the drums. The laws regulating African gatherings became increasingly restrictive until, in 1856, people of African descent were no longer legally allowed to play horns or drums within the city limits.[17]

Alternatively, we can look at Afro-Peruvian *cofradías* or religious brotherhoods. Though never subject to restrictive laws or prohibition as in Late Ottoman Izmir or nineteenth-century New Orleans, these *cofradias*—whose spiritual expressions were syncretic vestiges from African religious practices—were met with great suspicion by the Catholic Church and Peruvian authorities. During their religious and spiritual celebrations, the Afro-Peruvian *cofradias* would

[16] Ibid, 160.
[17] Ibid, 161.

gather and process through their districts singing, dancing, and playing percussive instruments, much like they would have at the Calf Festival. As if mirroring the words published in the *Hizmet* newspaper, these celebrations were framed as a disruption of public order. For example, Alonso Carrió de la Vandera, a Spanish civil servant in the Viceroyalty of Peru, described the cofradias singing as “howling” and used words like “ridiculous,” “dishonest,” and “unpleasant” to describe their public activities.[18]

Though the Calf Festival prohibition laws were officially instituted, the Ottoman government never actually enforced the law. It often lacked the resources to enforce new regulations. However, its increasing perception of the Calf Festival as a “problem” further indicates that the outward expression of African culture and community threatened Ottoman elite sensibilities—and likely the increasingly restrictive ideas regarding Ottoman identity, foreshadowing what was to come during the early republican period.

Try as they might to distance themselves from the Ottoman past, the government of early republican Turkey was still very much influenced by late Ottoman political, social, and cultural thought. Many of the founders of the Republic of Turkey had been members of the Committee of Union and Progress who had joined the Turkish nationalist movement led by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, and were eventually able to continue their political careers as members of the Republican People’s Party (CHP) quite seamlessly. Under Ataturk and the newly formed republican government, the policing of ethnoreligious identities and expression continued—and the Calf Festival was not spared. In 1925, the republican government—at that point only two years old—passed an act that closed all Sufi places of worship, schools, and other spaces,

[18] “La-Presencia-Afrodescendiente.Pdf,” accessed March 19, 2022, https://centroderecursos.cultura.pe/sites/default/files/rb/pdf/La-presencia-afrodescendiente.pdf.

essentially outlawing Sufi orders. The law even went as far as to allow the government to confiscate their assets, meaning the Afro-Turkish community of Izmir could no longer venerate the tomb of Yusuf Dede, historically associated with the Bektashi order. Since the tomb played an integral part in the Calf Festival celebrations, they could no longer celebrate the Calf Festival. Moreover, unlike the late Ottoman government, which was stretched thin and lacked the resources to enforce these laws, the new republican government did not falter in its aims.[19]

The signing of the Lausanne Convention in 1923 had a tremendous set the tone for how the Republic of Turkey would handle ethnoreligious minorities. According to the treaty's Articles 37-45, only non-Muslim groups are recognized as minorities. Through the treaty, these groups were given the right to use their language, political equality, and the right to religious freedom. While the treaty does not mention any specific non-Muslim groups, the Turkish government has only recognized its Armenian, Greek, and Jewish communities as they were the largest minority groups under the Ottoman millet system. This, of course, left out other non-Muslim minorities like the Chaldeans and the Assyrians and countless Muslim ethnic minorities like the Kurds, Hemshin people, the Laz, Roma, Circassians, and Afro-Turks.[20]

However, while these legal frameworks existed, in practice, they did not protect these minority groups from social harm and violence, nor did they prevent the state from enacting contradicting laws and policies. The negative outlook on multiculturalism was propagated through newspapers, news media, and many Turkish citizens bought into this. For example, in 1924, the new constitution denied the country's Kurdish population autonomy and prohibited the use of Kurdish in public spaces. In the late 1920s and 1930s, a campaign, "Citizen, Speak

[19] Ferguson. "The African Presence in Late Ottoman Izmir and Beyond," 193.

[20] TOKTAS and ARAS, "The EU and Minority Rights in Turkey," 701-704.

Turkish!" (*Vatandaş Türkçe konuş*!) was started by university students in Istanbul. It was eventually widely adopted by the public and gained much media attention—and remained popular for over a decade.[21]

Perception of Blackness in the early republican era and beyond

Perhaps one of the most significant changes brought about by the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the consequent signing of the Lausanne Convention—particularly related to the experiences of many Afro-Ottomans—was the Greek-Turkish population exchange. Signed by the governments of Greece and Turkey in 1923, it stipulated that the 1.6 million ethnic Greeks living in Anatolia and the 400,000 Muslims living in Greek territories be forcibly removed from their ancestral homes and relocated. Because many of the descendants of enslaved African Ottomans who inhabited Crete and other regions now within Greek borders were Muslim, they, too, were mandated to leave what had become their homes and forcibly relocated to Anatolia. As mentioned previously, this was a disastrous process for those subject to this exchange, and many Afro-Turk families currently living in the Aegean region are descendants of Black families who had been enslaved or living in mainland Greece and its islands.[22]

There has not been significant scholarship produced about this critical juncture in the history of the Black diaspora in Turkey, and we don't know how recently arrived Black *mubadiller* interacted with or were perceived by pre-existing Afro-Turk communities. We don't know how they found work or learned Turkish; presumably, many of them arrived speaking Greek or another language. We don't know how they—or the other Afro-Turk families already

[21] Ibid.
[22] Michael Ferguson, "Enslaved and Emancipated Africans on Crete," 174.

living in the Aegean—learned to navigate the constraints of Turkish nationalism and identity. However, we do know that because of the legacy of slavery, African-descended people were left at the bottom of the social hierarchy.

Even though Ottoman slavery was not racialized in the same manner as slavery was in the Atlantic, enslavement was the dominant way in which people of African descent became part of Ottoman society. An association with slavery and the types of labor associated with it, namely domestic work, lingered long after manumission and the abolishment of slavery. For example, Turkish citizens of African descent were not allowed to serve on the police force until the mid-1970s; the application excluded "people with black skin (negros)" or "*cildinin siyah (zenci).*" [23] Many Afro-Turk women still worked as domestic laborers, like their enslaved African ancestors in the villages surrounding Izmir like Tire, Torbalı, and Ödemiş. For instance, a newspaper in 1932 reported that Americans working in Izmir were so pleased with the efforts of the Afro-Turk domestic workers that they hoped to take them back to America when their time in Turkey ended. The article was titled "Black Servant Women are wanted to send from our city to America."[24]

The skin color regulation is listed among other kinds of physical ailments and skin conditions, including being "limp" and the presence of pox and other scarring on the face and body.[25] While there is no clear origin or reason for this regulation of race and skin color, its pairing with other medical ailments assumes that Blackness is a condition that would make a person inherently unwell and physically unfit. The exclusion of Afro-Turks from the police force also implies that they were not perceived as full Turkish citizens who would otherwise be able to

[23] T.C. Resmi Gazetesi, 7 June 1975, 15258, 4.
[24] Ferguson. "The African Presence in Late Ottoman Izmir and Beyond," 199.
[25] T.C. Resmi Gazetesi, 7 June 1975, 15258, 4.

work in all aspects of public service. Scholar Michael Ferguson points out that the desirability of Afro-Turkish women's domestic labor by American families living in Izmir indicates their place in Turkish society. American families, often connected to the NATO military base, could re-create American racial hierarchies in Turkey because Afro-Turks inhabited a similar place in the Turkish social strata—like their Black American counterparts, where domestic labor in the homes of the white upper class is also a legacy of slavery.[26]

Films made during the "golden age" of Turkish film, known as the Yeşilçam era (1950s-the 1970s), further highlight this legacy in how Black women domestic workers are portrayed. Many of these films depict Afro-Turk women as Arap Bacı or Bacı Kalfa, a racialized caricature akin to the African American stereotype of the "mammy."[27] And like the mammy, Arap Bacı was usually older and matronly, overweight, religious (or superstitious), spoke with a heavy accent—and she always served as a caregiver to wealthy Turkish families. Dursune Şirin, an Afro-Turk woman born in Thrace in 1913, was the most famous Yeşilçam era actress who played these roles. Throughout her lengthy career, Şirin starred in thirty-eight films, where she was mostly relegated to the Arap Bacı stereotype.[28]

In addition, perpetuating tropes about Afro-Turkish people as domestic laborers and servants, there also was a pattern of sexualizing Black bodies in Turkish popular culture. A 1964 Yeşilçam film, *Suçlular Aramızda* or *Criminals are Among Us*, shows a Black man dancing in his underwear in the background when the main character accuses his partner of having a Black lover. What is most striking about this scene is that the two main characters are fully clothed—

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[26] Ferguson. "The African Presence in Late Ottoman Izmir and Beyond," 199.
[27] Bam Willoughby, "Opposing A Spectacle of Blackness: *Arap Baci*, *Baci Kalfa*, *Dadi*, and the Invention of African Presence in Turkey," *Lateral* 10, no. 1 (2021), https://doi.org/10.25158/L10.1.15.
[28] Tunay Altay, "Is there really no anti-Black racism in Turkey?," Bianet, July 4, 2020, https://m.bianet.org/english/people/226799-is-there-really-no-anti-black-racism-in-turkey.

the protagonist wearing a conservative suit and tie, and his love interest dawning a formal dress and white gloves. The depiction of the Black actor's almost-naked body juxtaposed with the formal appearance of his counterparts not only sexualizes the character but also makes him appear irrational and "uncivilized."[29]

In a 1982 issue of the erotic magazine Erkekçe, which features the popular Afro-Turk model Füsun Özben, we get a better glimpse into how Black men are sexualized. At one point in the interview, Özben is discussing a visit to an "African" village, where, as an act of hospitality, she claims that a woman lent Özben her husband for the night. She explains that he was a very strong man ("*çok strong*"). The interviewer follows up with a question asking Özben, who she thought was better in bed, white men or Black men? She replies, "I can't choose, but Black men are stronger, and as a woman, I want my man to be strong."[30]

This combination of hyper-sexuality and incivility is reminiscent of the brute caricature in American popular culture, which positioned the Black man and his sexuality as a threat to society and particularly to the sanctity and purity of white womanhood. But this stereotype is not just rooted in the Atlantic world; it's also deeply rooted in the Turkish context. One might only look to late Ottoman eunuch fantasies, like the novel *Harem Ağasının Muaşşakası, or The Love Making of a Eunuch*, published in 1913. It tells the story of a Black eunuch named Anber who wishes to settle down and marry a woman. Eventually, she attracts a potential suitor after she hears that he will be able to satisfy her sexually with a large dildo. However, on the wedding night, when Anber goes into the bathroom to put on the dildo, he never comes out. His new bride then goes into the bathroom to see what has happened and finds him lying dead on the floor. He

[29] Fanatik Film - Yerli, Suçlular Aramızda - Eski Türk Filmi Tek Parça, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j5v96bbqMIw; Tunay Altay, "Is there really no anti-Black racism in Turkey?," Bianet, July 4, 2020,

[30] "Ayın Güzeli Füsun, "Erkekçe," March 1982, 116.

had been bitten in the crotch by a poisonous snake hidden in the box where he kept the dildo. The wife, who no longer has an outlet for her sexual desires, goes crazy.

If the late Ottoman reader was attracted to this novel by its titillating title, they might have ultimately been disappointed by the ending, which serves more as a cautionary tale. It shows what can happen if a young Ottoman woman is sexually curious and attracted to Black eunuchs, who are inherently uncivilized and must resort to "unnatural" methods to sexually satisfy their partners. It warns eunuchs against acting out sexual fantasies and trying to assume "natural" male sexual power. [31]

Despite the engrained anti-Black stereotypes in Turkish popular culture, a few notable Afro-Turks rose to fame and earned a place of prominence in the cultural sphere. Esmeray—whose name meant "dark moon" in Turkish—is perhaps the most notable example. She became famous in the 1970s due to her deep, mournful voice and musical style influenced by Turkish psychedelic rock. Her rise to fame came at a time when discussions about multiculturalism were still very much discouraged. Consequently, most of Esmeray's musical catalog songs do not explicitly address her race. However, one of her lesser-known singles subtly speaks to her struggles as an Afro-Turk. The song, entitled 13.5, tells the story of a young Black girl looking wistfully out a window. At one point, the lyrics say, "It's raining, it's pouring / the Arab girl is looking from the window/ That "Arab" woman is me/ Curly haired, red-lipped/ Beady eyes, pearly-white teeth/A dark fate is written on my forehead." [32]

The lyrics in Esmeray's song refer to the old Ottoman nursery rhyme Arap Kızı Camdan Bakıyor. Akin to American nursery rhymes like "Ten Little Monkeys" or "Jimmy Crack Corn,"

[31] Karahan, Burcu, "Repressed in Translation: Representation of Female Sexuality in Ottoman Erotica," Journal of Turkish Literature 9 (2012), 30–45.
[32] Gratien, Chris. "Esmeray - 13,5." Tuned. Accessed December 12, 2022. http://www.tuned-in-turkish.com/2020/07/13-5.html.

Arap Kızı Camdan Bakıyor is still popular today and has been traditionally sung to children by their parents. Like those popular American nursery rhymes, Arap Kızı Camdan Bakiyor has its roots in anti-Blackness. Jimmy Crack Corn is about an enslaved man who now feels free to drink as much corn whisky as he likes now that his owner is dead. And in the original lyrics for "Ten Little Monkeys," they were not singing about simians. The song was called "Ten Little Niggers." In many popular American nursery rhymes, the original lyrics or certain verses are omitted in modern renditions. Still, they are often repeated without knowing the original context. Though Arap Kızı Camdan Bakıyor's lyrics do not seem to have changed, its context is similarly left unsaid and erased from national memory. They describe a Black (Arap) girl looking out of the window as other children are out playing in the rain. With a single line, the rhyme illustrates the fundamental power relations underlying Ottoman slavery and its legacy for Turkish society. The girl looking out the window is not free to come out to play with her would-be peers.[33]

Esmeray's ambivalent stardom in Turkey reflected a predicament like that faced by the Afro-Turk community in the early 2000s, and likewise, her public image was shaped by both domestic and global understandings of Blackness. Her prominence was informed, in part, by the fact that there were many internationally famous Black singers and artists popular in Turkey in the mid-twentieth century. For example, Eartha Kitt, an iconic Black American singer and actress, spent a brief period living in Üsküdar, a historic neighborhood in the Asian side of Istanbul. While there, she learned to sing the popular Turkish folk song, Katibim (Üsküdar'a Gider İken) and later recorded an English adaptation with RCA records. The song became a hit with American audiences but was celebrated in Turkey. In 1955, a popular weekly publication,

[33] "ARAP KIZI NEDEN CAMDAN BAKIYOR? - Emine ÇOBAN," Aydın Denge Gazetesi, accessed March 26, 2022, http://www.aydindenge.com.tr/yazi/emine-coban/01/02/2019/arap-kizi-neden-camdan-bakiyor.

HAFTA, even ran a story celebrating this with the headline "Üsküdar'a Gider İken Şarkısini Amerikalaştıran Eartha Kitt," or "Eartha Kitt Americanizes Üsküdar'a Gider İken."[34]

In this space, Blackness and Black music were framed as classy and cultured—and it was actively sought out by this part of Turkish society. Those in Turkish high society particularly welcomed Black American Jazz singers. For example, Nat King Cole was memorialized on a February 1965 cover of the magazine *Ses* after his sudden death, where he was labeled the "Kadife Sesli, Altın Kalpli Zenci," or "The Velvet Voiced Negro with a Heart of Gold."[35] Additionally, Louis Armstrong, one of the most renowned jazz musicians in the world, performed several times in Turkey—staying at swanky hotels like the Hilton Istanbul and playing chic venues like Saray Sineması.[36]

Finally, there is the story of Münir Ertegün, Turkey's ambassador to the United States, from 1934 to 1944. Ertegün and his sons Ahmet and Nesuhi had all been enthusiastic jazz fans, and when they moved to Washington, DC, for Ertegün's ambassadorship, they would invite jazz musicians to the embassy to play. Duke Ellington, Henry Allen, and Zutty Singleton are just some of the Black musicians invited to the embassy as distinguished guests during the pre-Civil Rights era, ruffled feathers amongst the white American Washington elite. However, in response to the controversy of inviting Black artists to mix freely with white in a social setting, Ertegün

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[34] Üsküdar'a Gider İken Şarkısini Amerikalaştıran Eartha Kitt, "HAFTA," July 8, 1955, 10.
[35] Kadife Sesli, Altın Kalpli Zenci, "Ses," February 27, 1965, 8-9.
[36] Karahasanoğlu, Songül, and Yaprak Melike Uyar. "The early performance of jazz music in Turkey." Porte Akademik: Journal of Music and Dance Studies 13 (2016): 129-139; Twitter post, October 9, 2018, 2:58 p.m., https://twitter.com/tearsofsin/status/1049735942725079040; Twitter post, August 23, 2019, 3:03 p.m., https://twitter.com/sigaramcamel/status/1164976361905299456;

famously said, "We take our guests in from the front door, whoever they are, and we would be glad to host you as well if you decide to become our guests."[37]

From the early republican period through the rest of the twentieth century the perceptions of Afro-Turk identity were shaped by late Ottoman perceptions of Blackness and an interaction with Western Black popular culture, particularly through music. We also do not see the Afro-Turk community actively working to cultivate a collective Black consciousness or identity or intentionally engaging in a global diasporic conversation. However, with the opening of the national discourse in the early 2000s, that began to shift.

Afro-Turks in Diasporic Dialogue

The publication of Olpak's semi-autobiographical work and the creation of the Afro-Turk organization were watershed moments for the community. Since its publication, journalists and academics have written about the Afro-Turk community and their revival of the Calf Festival. They use headlines and bylines that frame the community as "lost" or "forgotten." There's "The Fate of Afro-Turks: Nothing left but the color"[38] and "Descendants of African slaves to the Ottoman Empire, Afro-Turks seek to revive their ancestor's traditions—but there is barely any

[37] Greenfield, Robert. The Last Sultan: The Life and Times of Ahmet Ertegun. New York, United States: Simon & Schuster, 2012.

[38] Afro-europe, "AFRO-EUROPE: Fate of the Afro-Turks: Nothing Left but Colour," AFRO-EUROPE (blog), September 1, 2012, http://afroeurope.blogspot.com/2012/09/the-fate-of-afro-turks-nothing-left-but.html

left."[39] Or this one: "In a country that's beginning to acknowledge its great diversity, they are [Afro-Turks] beginning to unearth their forgotten history."[40]

But "lost" and "forgotten" are passive actions and don't fully speak to the fact that there was a concerted effort on the part of the early republican government to stamp out any "deviant" cultural elements. The Afro-Turks, along with other ethnic minority communities, were forced to give up or make invisible their unique cultural heritage to assimilate into a narrowly constructed Turkish identity—or at least appear that they did. This narrative also assumes that there is one "essential" past or one essential version of Black Turkishness that can only be reclaimed by "going back, or as Stuart Hall says, "grounded in a mere recovery" of some "authentic" past—and assumes that Afro-Turks altogether ceased to engage in any identity-building practices during the twentieth century.[41]

Though information regarding how Afro-Turks perceived themselves and their culture in the twentieth century is scarce, we can look to the early 2000s to learn how the community conceptualized their identity. Through the Afro-Turk organization's consistent engagement with their local community (Izmir), the Turkish national audience, and diasporic exchange, we learn how Afro-Turks are thinking and talking about Blackness, their place in Turkish society and their desire to be a part of a larger conversation on global Blackness and the legacies of slavery.

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[39] "The Afro-Turks: Turkey's Little-Known Black Minority Reclaims Its Past," Haaretz, accessed March 26, 2022, https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/turkey/.premium-the-afro-turks-turkeys-little-known-black-minority-reclaims-its-past-1.5460354

[40] "Turkish Descendants of African Slaves Begin to Discover Their Identity," The National, September 1, 2012, https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/mena/turkish-descendants-of-african-slaves-begin-to-discover-their-identity-1.364124.

[41] Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity in Diaspora," Undoing Place?, eds. Linda McDowell (New York: Hodder Education, 1997), 231-242.

In 2013, Olpak and other Afro-Turk organization members traveled to Germany to participate in a panel discussion about Afro-Turk history and Olpak's book *Kenya-Crete-Istanbul*. There they met Katharina Oguntoye, an Afro-German writer and activist who had, by this time, been working for decades to address the sociopolitical challenges Afro-Germans faced in German society; she had founded the nonprofit organization, Joliba, as a part of this effort. During this meeting, Oguntoye and Olpak discussed plans to ensure that the two groups stay in contact and have annual meetups and exchanges.[42]

A year later, in 2014, Afro-German members from Joliba traveled to Izmir to spend a week in cultural communion with Afro-Turks. Since then, then the group has met up each year to participate in this diasporic community-building exercise and in 2017, the two groups published a booklet discussing their annual summits. Written in German, Turkish, and English, the booklet opens with an introduction from Şakir Doğuluer—who became president of the organization after Olpak's death—and Oguntoye.[43]

The introduction outlines the goals of the Afro-Turk organization and these diasporic exchanges as expressed by Olpak. First, it states that Olpak wished that the Afro-Turkish community had its "own community center where gathering, meeting, and exchanging could occur." Secondly, Olpak wishes that the Afro-Turk community's youth "gain more self-confidence and develop perspectives for the future" through events like the annual Calf Festival and other events. It says, "We planned this booklet together to inform people about our exchanges. We want to share our experiences and the knowledge of Afro-Turks and Germans throughout the world." This is important to note because it speaks to the dual aim of the Afro-

[42] "Afacan_joliba_2015_2016_turk.Pdf," accessed March 26, 2022, https://www.afacan.de/pdffe/afacan_joliba_2015_2016_turk.pdf.
[43] Ibid.

Turk organization, that's rooted in retrieving Afro-Ottoman cultural practices and developing their community identity further through these exchanges within the diasporic community. Or, as Olpak puts it, "developing perspectives for the future."[44]

These retreats are held at Afacan, a center on the Aegean coast specifically for hosting cross-cultural exchanges between youth groups. They stay at Afacan for five days and visit villages surrounding Izmir for two days. During the week, they also take excursions to tourist sites like Pamukkale or Ephesus. The group has dedicated time to talk about various topics, including their everyday experiences and systemic racism, what terms to use to define themselves, and their hopes for the future generations of their communities. They also discuss racism and their experiences being Black in a country whose official history tends to obscure their communities.[45]

Unsurprisingly, during the exchange—particularly during excursions and the group is visible to tourists and other Turkish citizens—the group often experiences instances of subtle and quotidian racism. For example, when the group traveled to Pamukkale, other Turkish tourists stood and gawked at them ("*...arasında Afro Türkler ve Afro Almanlar yine dikkat çektiler. Irkçı bakışlar ve yorumlar maruz kaldı*"). Then, one Turkish tourist approached a volunteer serving as a German-Turkish translator for the group and asked her where the group had come from in English. The translator informed the woman that she could ask the group since they were Turks and, thus, spoke Turkish. Turkish tourists assumed that they could not have been Turks because this group was Black, which is something many Afro-Turks experiences in their daily lives.[46]

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[44] https://egelobisi.com, "Afro Alman İle Afro Türk Buluşması," https://egelobisi.com, accessed September 1, 2021, http://egelobisi.com/afro-alman-ile-afro-turk-bulusmasi/1766/.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid.

This manifestation of quotidian racism is also reflected in the oral histories conducted by the Turkish Historical Society in a collection called, Voices from a Quiet Past: Afro-Turks Past and Present. For this project, Tarih Vakfi interviews members of the Afro-Turk community throughout the Aegean region, including Izmir, Ayvalık, Aydin, and Muğla. Interviewees discuss various topics, including family histories of slavery, daily social interactions with non-Black Turks, education and economic opportunity, and identity. In the section "Identity and Belonging," one Afro-Turk man from Muğla talks about his living and working in various parts of Turkey. He mentions that no matter where he was in the country, he constantly received comments and questions from strangers that implicitly implied his "otherness." "You speak Turkish so well" or "Where are you from?" were things he heard from other Turks constantly.[47]

One woman interviewed for this oral history project spoke about her experience going to primary school and being the only Afro-Turk in attendance. She said that she never questioned how her family looked until she entered primary school, where being the "only one" made her start questioning her appearance. She mentioned being teased by the other students with the aforementioned "Arap Kızı Camdan Bakıyor" nursery rhyme, with everyone crowding around her to sing the lyrics when it rained. She said she never explicitly desired to be white, but during this time, she began to straighten her hair to be more like the other students and conform to their standard of beauty.[48]

Finally, another young Afro-Turk man reflected on his experiences with racism in society. He remembered that when he was young, people would call him "Arap" and say things like "you are no like us" or "you're not from here," so much that he often used to think to

[47] Tarih Vakfı, *Sessiz Bir Geçmişten Sesler: Afrika Kökenli "Türk" Olmanın Dünü ve Bugünü* (Istanbul: Tarih Vakfı History Foundation, 2008), 40.
[48] Ibid, 42.

himself, "Am I Turkish? Or Am I not? I used to have doubts sometimes!" He recounted an experience when he interviewed for a job, and when the hiring manager saw that he was an Afro-Turk, he told the young man that he could not work there. When the young man asked why, the hiring manager plainly said, "Your skin is different."[49]

When encountering these situations, this sparked essential conversations between Afro-Turks and Afro-Germans. During one discussion, Afro-Turk elders spoke with Afro-German youth, giving them strategies to cope with the everyday racism they experience. The booklet even notes that participants from both groups felt more at ease in the comfort of the Afacan retreat center or the villages than they did during the excursions. The more secluded and private environment offered them an escape from quotidian microaggression and unsolicited comments and questions about their heritage they received from other Turkish people ("… *iki grubun günkük hayatta tecrübe edilen ırkçı yaklaşım ve dışlama bir ara vermiştir*").[50]

In the last section of the booklet, there is a section titled "Interview with the Elders." In these oral history interviews with Afro-Turk elders, four overarching themes emerge access to education, histories of enslavement, racial terminologies, and general sentiments expressing the usefulness of these transnational and intercultural meetups. Of the ten interviews done, all subjects were Afro-Turk women—and these women spoke about their lack of access to education. All had completed some schooling, but none had finished their secondary education. Some noted prioritizing taking care of younger siblings while their parents worked as agricultural laborers. Others mentioned having to leave school to join their parents in their fields. Many of them express the desire for their children and grandchildren to access educational opportunities in ways that they had not. When speaking of her son, one woman named Makbule

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[49] Ibid, 43.
[50] https://egelobisi.com, "Afro Alman İle Afro Türk Buluşması."

said, “I had no dreams (“*bir hayalım yoktu*”) because I knew I could not continue school. I hope my son’s dreams come true. I’ve seen change in my lifetime.”[51]

Some of the women briefly spoke about their family histories, referencing slavery. One woman noted that although she was unsure, she assumed that her family came from Sudan. Another does not specify where her family came from but comments that her maternal great-grandfather spoke Arabic, not Turkish. Moreover, a third noted that her grandparents spoke a foreign language that was neither Turkish nor Arabic. The most specific and explicit reference to slavery comes from a woman named Ayşe, who said that her paternal great-grandparents came from Africa and were brought to Anatolia by an Ottoman ruler (“*Osmanlı hükümdarı*”) and were later given land.[52]

Interestingly, two women also spoke of the terminology used by themselves and other non-Black people to describe their race. While *siyah* and *zenci* are words that have been used to describe Black people in Turkey, the word in question here was Arap—meaning Arab. One of the women, Mesure, talked about how many in the community have stopped using the label arap to describe themselves and have instead tried to adopt the term Afro-Turk. She also noted that people use Arap in “both good and bad ways.” Here she was referring to the contentious nature of the word. As with zenci, arap can be used and perceived as a derogatory term. The other woman, Sabriye, expresses discomfort with the team, saying, “We are all false Arabs (“*hempimiz sahte Araplarız*”). People call us Arabs, but we do not speak Arabic. The Turks equate dark skin with Arab.”[53]

[51] Ibid.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Ibid.

Finally, most interviewees expressed how these Afro-Turk—Afro-German meetups were beneficial and productive. At the end of the interview with Sabriye—who had expressed frustration with the racism she had always experienced—she noted that these meetings help relieve stress. She also hoped that the meetings would continue to happen, particularly for the benefit of the youth, saying, "With adults, it is difficult, but young trees can be shaped (*genç ağaçlar şekillendirilebilir*)." The youngest interviewee, Meryem, expressed a similar desire, believing that if these meetups continue, she was optimistic it would unite the Afro-Turk community even further.[54]

Their open discussions about navigating quotidian racism with Afro-Germans allow Afro-Turks to develop a more robust vocabulary for their racialized experiences. These discussions are integral to constructing what it means to be Black and Turkish in a modern context. Doing this in tandem with Afro-Germans signals a desire to form these vocabularies in conversation with other African diasporic groups—and thus, a desire to participate in global Black consciousness and identity. It is also worth noting that in Germany, Turks are the major racialized minority, adding an extra layer of solidarity and connection between the two groups.

Despite the Afro-Turk communities' willingness to enter the diasporic dialogue, this exchange is uneven. Afro-Turk conceptions of Blackness are informed by other diasporic populations—in this instance, by direct engagement with Afro-Germans. We also see that the broader Turkish perception of Blackness has been informed by Black American culture. But as western academics who study the African diasporic cultures of the Atlantic have typically ignored the diasporas in the Middle East and North Africa, Afro-Turks have also largely been ignored by Black diasporic populations themselves.

[54] Ibid.

Looking at the history of Black transnational solidarities and networks of exchange, there are countless examples of Black Americans engaging with Black people in the French metropole since the early twentieth century. Black writers and artists of the Harlem Renaissance maintained close communications via translation with the Black artists and thinkers of the negritude movement in France.[55] In the 1960s and 70s, Black Americans started to build solidarities with Black people in African nations. Fannie Lou Hamer, civil rights leader and voting rights advocate from the Mississippi Delta, famously traveled to Guinea with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) to discuss civil and human rights issues and the similarities and differences between their respective countries. The exchange she and the other members of SNCC had with the Guinean people had a profound impact on Hamer and led her to reconceptualize her historical identity and self-image.[56]

Famed writer and activist James Baldwin actually lived in Istanbul intermittently throughout the 1960s. Baldwin saw Turkey as a place of refuge and finished some of his most famous written works while living in Istanbul, including, *Another Country* and *The Fire Next Time*. But despite his on-and-off presence in Turkey for a decade and his positioning as witness to the empire of American whiteness, there is no evidence suggesting that Baldwin engaged in any intentional solidarity building or exchange with the Afro-Turk community. Baldwin primarily associated with Turkish progressive intellectuals, who were very much a part of the Turkish equivalent of whiteness. Baldwin's adoption of this de facto position is demonstrated in an interaction with his friend, the writer Yaşar Kemal, a Turkish novelist of Kurdish descent. Expressing the relief he felt while seeking refuge from the challenges and stress of his life in the

[55] Brent Hayes Edwards, The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2003), 12.
[56] Keisha N. Blain, Tiffany M. Gill, and Michael Oliver West. To Turn the Whole World over: Black Women and Internationalism. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019), 219-224.

United States, Baldwin told Kemal, “I feel free in Istanbul.” Kemal replied—no doubt with the oppression of Kurds and other groups in mind: “Jimmy, that’s because you’re an American.”[57]

The marginalization of Afro-Turks within the wider diaspora is reminiscent of other analogous cases. For example, Ashkenazi Jewish identity has dominated the conception of the Jewish diaspora at the expense of Sephardi and Mizrahi communities. Sometimes labeled as “Ashkenormativity,”, particularly in the United States, where most Jews are of European descent. As a result, the Sephardic and Mizrahi experiences are often overshadowed by the dominant Ashkenazi culture and its portrayal in historical memory. For example, it is common for Sephardim in the United States to attend a synagogue centered in Ashkenazi cultural practice. However, few Ashkenazim attend synagogues or services rooted in Sephardic practices. Nevertheless, much like the Black diasporic populations of the Atlantic often ignore other diasporic narratives, Sephardim and Mizrachim are ignored by the Ashkenazi mainstream.[58]

Just as American Jewish identity is intertwined with the memory of the Holocaust and European anti-Semitism, Black identity is associated with the history of plantation slavery—which is unique to the Americas but frequently tied to the United States in global discourse. These “normative” narratives often obscure the fact that non-American Black people and non-Ashkenazi Hews have their own unique histories and experiences with racism, persecution and slavery. Ottoman historiography has reinforced these ideas by feeding into the narrative that Ottoman slavery wasn’t as bad or that Turkish society isn’t as racist as its Western counterparts.

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[57] Magdalena J. Zaborowska, *James Baldwin's Turkish Decade: Erotics of Exile* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 145.

[58] “Beyond the Critical Framework of Ashkenormativity: Reimagining Jewish Solidarity and Klal Yisrael,” Zaman Collective, accessed March 27, 2022, https://www.zamancollective.com/all-posts/michaelbeyondashkenormativity.

Or that Sephardic Jews in the Ottoman Empire and later Turkey didn't suffer persecution and were treated with benevolence by the state.[59]

Navigating the Nation and Diaspora

There's a neighborhood in Izmir called Basmane. It is one of the oldest districts in the city. Where the neighboring seaside district, Alsancak, is a haven for the Turkish middle and upper class, complete with luxury fashion brands and fine dining, Basmane is grittier and rougher around the edges. Many of its historic buildings are falling apart, there is noticeably less green space, and the municipality sanitation workers who fastidiously clean Alsancak's streets have all but disappeared. As Beyhan Turkollu, chair of the Afro-Turk organization, walks through the neighborhood, she explains that in the late Ottoman period, Basmane used to be home to the city's significant Greek and Armenian population. She then points up at the fortress on a hilltop, lording over the entire neighborhood. It's Kadifekale, where Afro-Ottomans celebrated their annual Calf Festival. "Afro-Turks used to live here too," she says. "Now, there are only Africans, Syrians, and Kurds."

Before the Great Fire of 1922, which obliterated Izmir's Greek and Armenian quarters, Basmane represented Ottoman multiculturalism and all its promises. Its destruction in the aftermath of the War of Independence represented the failure of the emerging Turkish government to reconcile this multiculturalism with its nationalist ideology. But today, Basmane serves as an example of how liberal policy has neglected communities on the margins of Turkish

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[59] Marc D. Baer, Sultanic Saviors and Tolerant Turks: Writing Ottoman Jewish History, Denying the Armenian Genocide (Indiana University Press, 2020).

society. Yet, Turkollu and other members of the Afro-Turk organization have learned to navigate this space between marginality and mainstream acceptance over the last two decades.

Beyhan is headed to St. Voulokous, an old Greek Orthodox church and one of the handful of Ottoman-era structures that have been restored by the state. As one of the representatives of the Afro-Turk organization, she's been invited to a baroque concert at St. Voulokous, sponsored by the German consulate and the municipality. A cocktail hour precedes the main event, and when she arrives, she is greeted warmly by a German consular official.

The church garden is filled with local business, cultural, and political elite. There is white wine, an endless supply of hors d'oeuvres, classical music playing in the background, and a light summer evening breeze. On the slope just outside the church garden walls, children are playing outside a row of dilapidated houses. They seem not to notice the gathering of people in the churchyard. Likewise, the concert guests do not seem to register their presence on the periphery.

Beyhan is no stranger to "politicking" and is already acquainted with many guests. She makes her rounds and exchanges pleasantries before settling at a standing table in front of the church of stairs. As the cocktail hour moves on, other guests accompany her. As if on cue, each time Beyhan begins to talk, the newest arrival comments on how well she speaks Turkish. And each time, Beyhan patiently explains that her Turkish is so good because she is, in fact, Turkish—her parents were Turkish, and their parents were Ottomans. This is followed by a flurry of questions, which prompts Beyhan to give a short spiel on the history of Ottoman slavery and the work the Afro-Turk organization is doing to research and revive their cultural heritage. Her small audience reacts with interest: "Wow, I'm *Izmirli* and didn't know any of this," and "Is there any way we can support?" Savvy Beyhan passes out a round of business cards and invites them all to the upcoming Calf Festival, which has been postponed until September. They take the

cards and thank her for the history lesson. Seemingly pleased with Beyhan—and themselves—they pledge to join the Calf Festival festivities with genuine, well-meaning smiles.

In the summer of 2022, I was with Beyhan Turkollu when she attended that concert. I was conducting research and spent hours each week at the Afro-Turk organization's office when she asked if I wanted to come to this event as her guest. I said yes, keen to see the inside of a restored Orthodox Church and not yet realizing that for Beyhan, this would be a chance to network and garner support for the organization. Nevertheless, this simple anecdote seamlessly touches on the multilayered themes in this paper.

We see how the Turkish state has neglected to invest in neighborhoods where specific minority communities live. The prominent attendees' failure to acknowledge the children playing above the church walls shows how this negligence is reflected not just through state policy but also on a societal level. Their racist surprise at Beyhan's fluent Turkish, followed by their enthusiastic interest in supporting the Afro-Turk organization, show us that despite being marginalized, Afro-Turks are deemed a "safe" model minority. Lasty, Beyhan's "politicking" shows us that she, on some level, understands that this event was more than a lovely evening out. It was an opportunity to network and brand the Afro-Turk organization and Afro-Turk identity in a way that is amenable to Turkish liberal society. And perhaps this is how their movement has succeeded where other minority groups in Turkey have failed. In order to celebrate their history and identity, learning to navigate their sociopolitical reality has been essential. Because like the Turkish idiom says, "*Oyunun kurallarını bilmiyorsan, masaya oturmayacaksın* — if you don't know the rules of the game, you won't sit at the table.

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