

# “Are New Sufis “Grey Turks”? Urbanite National Identities and Religious Reconfigurations

by Marta Dominguez Diaz, University of St.Gallen

Secularism is a central aspect to Turkey's identity as a nation. It has been and still is a driving force for political action and it also is a central element in shaping the societal dynamics of modern Turkey. In 1923, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881-1938) was resolute to establish a nascent Turkish nation as a republican secularist state, and with that view his government instilled a series of reforms.<sup>1</sup> Through legal and institutional change, secular systems of law and education were set up, and during the transformation a series of measures targeted the hitherto position of power traditionally held by the *ulama* within the state administration.<sup>2</sup> Religion was to be relegated to the private sphere. Those among the former elites who could not or were not willing to embrace

1 Atatürk's programme of reforms (commonly known as *Atatürk Devrimleri*) is a subject extensively dealt with by scholars of a variegated range of disciplines. For an introductory analysis see, for example, Zürcher (2004) and Landau's (1984) edited volume.

2 The term *ulama* refers to a diversity of religious scholars that exist in Muslim societies. In Turkey some of the most prominent religious institutions (e.g. sufi *tekkes* and Islamic schools) were abolished by the secularizing project. For a more nuanced approach to the changing role of Turkey's *ulama* see Amit Bein (2011).

the new ideological project were soon disempowered, discredited for their backwardness and lost as a result their social and economic status and, ultimately, their public authority.

In contrast to them, the change of system permitted the development of a new elite, supportive of the Kemalist project that benefitted economically from these political transformations. Thus, a new privileged class emerged. They looked at Europe for sources of cultural and political inspiration in a conscious attempt of trying to disconnect themselves from the Ottoman past. For the new class of Kemalist supporters, the ethnic diversity of the country and the all-pervading nature of Islam (i.e. with a tendency to manifest itself

in all aspects of social life) were perceived as important impediments to social progress.<sup>3</sup> In contraposition to “traditional” values, they often came to identify themselves with a newly emergent urbanite culture, a “de-ethnicized” identity with cosmopolitan aspirations and scarce sympathy for the social expression of Islamic religiosities.

For many Turks who were not part of this privileged minority, not only the turning to-

3 For the Kemalists' approach to race, religion and ethnicity in the first years of the Republic see Cagaptay (2007).



### Catching Europe in Istanbul:

Yunus Emre Yildirim, student in Industrial Engineering, Kadir Has University, Turkey:

„My aim in this picture was to emphasize diversity in Istanbul; in this case, religious diversity. I thought it would be a good combination to capture an orthodox patriarchate and a minaret together. I took the photo in Fener (very close to our university). It also fits with the European image in my mind because Christianity symbolizes Europe, and Islam symbolizes Istanbul since 1453, but apart from my point of view, people can understand very different things.“

© Yunus Emre Yildirim

wards westernized modes of thought and lifestyles but also their often disenfranchised attitude towards the rest of the nation were viewed as proof of the elite's rejection and disapproval of Turkey's cultural and religious roots and of the actual identity of its current population. The pejorative term *Beyaz Türk* (White Turk)<sup>4</sup> is since then often used to refer to the Kemalist supporters. However, as the Kemalist project consolidated, *Beyaz Türk's* discourses were no longer the pejorative stance of a minority but an issue that threatened to divide the country over issues of national identity. Over time, a substantial part of the fast growing urbanite middle class have come to identify themselves with *White Turks'* political choices and views of society. The once loosely defined as a rich, educated, Westernized urbanite minority, the *Beyaz Türk*, have more recently come to be associated with a wider sector of society, who seem to hold a negative attitude towards other Turks. The political scientist Maya Arakon (2011) has described *White Turks* as those who sympathize with Kemalist ideology and who often are uneasy with Kurds and religious people. According to her, *White Turks* believe ethnic particularism and public religious expression should be eradicated through education and modernization. Arakon argues that despite their modernizing appeal *White Turks* have started to be questioned on the very basis of the values they are supposed to defend, because today, they are often criticized for their

4 The term "White Turk" was first used by journalist Ufuk Güldemir in his 1992 book to refer to those who opposed to the presidency of Turgut Özal, the country's first non-soldier president and a religious man of Kurdish origin. Turgut Özal's background was questioned with regard to his appropriateness as a successor to Atatürk as the leader of the country and top commander of the military.

purported arrogance towards other social actors and political factions, an attitude some say may threaten the pillars of democratic rule they are supposed to endorse.

The arrival to power of the religious and conservative Justice and Development Party (AKP) of Recep Tayyip Erdogan in 2002 with an overwhelming support of the *Black Turk* majority vote meant a radical change in the position traditionally occupied by the secular middle and upper classes, who began to lose the prominence they have held since the advent of the Republic.<sup>5</sup> In line with these political developments, a new social class of economically influential Turks who are eager to publicly manifest ethnic and religious affiliation have contributed to further heating up the debate on national identity issues centered around the question who better represents the values of Turkey's "modernity"? Among them there are public figures who, for example, do not hesitate to speak Turkish using specific accents previously associated with the rural world or with the "periphery" and/or by wearing religious symbols like the headscarf in places originally reserved to the secular, despite persisting discrimination (SES Türkiye, 2012). The discursive monopoly held by Kemalist supporters until recently needs to begin nowadays to accommodate or to learn to co-exist at least with other new identity projects.

Hence, there is a new class of influential Muslims who currently appear more often in the media and intend to make their "Islamic visibility" a symbol for the nation's endorsement of democratic values – in claiming re-

5 Erdogan himself is a Black Turk, to better understand how the Black/White Turks dyad pictures into the transformation of national politics in Turkey led by Erdogan and his party see Heper and Toktaş (2003).

spect primarily for the expression of religious identity. The case evidences that such disputes may not only have political implications, but need to be also seen as a power struggle over who holds the monopoly over the discursive formation of meanings in relation to cultural values and national identity. The dispute indicates that religious issues and lifestyle choices are not trivial matters of mere individual concern, but explanatory windows into an intricate network of social intersubjectivities; they are illustrative of how notions of identity relate to and are intertwined with social stratification, and social and political representation and power.

\* \* \*

Most of the more recent Islamist trends in the Turkish religious market of public discourses imply in the national context a profound rethinking of Turkishness and Muslim identity. These Islamisms in their diverse expressions can themselves be seen as ideological hybridizations between tradition and modernity, between religion and secularism, between cosmopolitanism and locality. In Turkey, they are both heirs and opponents of the Kemalist tradition. The new Islamist counter-elites epitomize this paradoxical and ambivalent nature: despite significantly owing their educational and professional identity to the state educational system, they are those who more fiercely oppose the attempts to threaten the visibility of Islam in the public sphere. Islamism has developed ideologies by which Turks can connect to other Muslims in other parts of the world. As a result, the cosmopolitanism of the *ummah*<sup>6</sup> is presented as a counter-

6 *Ummah* is an Arabic term generally translated as “community” or “nation”. In Islam, the term is used to refer to the community of

choice to the *White Turks*’ sustained attempts at mirroring themselves in the West. Now the binary opposition between cosmopolitan-secularist *versus* local Muslim identities is no longer tenable. Here there is a new set of religious ideologies that can be understood as being partly foreign and partly imported, yet not with a westernizing rather an Islamizing agenda. They are to be viewed as modern reconfigurations of religious traditions with innovative ways of looking at the nation-religion dyad, the pursuing of agendas that challenge both traditional interpretations of Islam and of Turkishness and the identity project of Kemalist modernities. In this regard, it is fair to suggest that modern Islamism is attempting to develop cultural and political deconstructions of fundamental identity markers, such as the categories of “Turk” and “Muslim.” By renaming and re-conceptualizing central aspects of religious ethos *vis-à-vis* new ways of articulating discourses of national belonging, Islamisms constitute a critique to traditional Turkish categories of Muslim identity, including those elaborated by the *tarikat* (Sufi Orders) (Yavuz, 2003; Zubaida, 1996).<sup>7</sup>

believers, that is to say, to all the Muslims peoples from across the world. Therefore, the *ummah* is for Muslims a supra-national community of people with a common religion and whom they hold a sense of a shared history.

7 A Sufi Order is a religious organization hierarchically organized in which devotees commit to perform a series of ritual practices regularly with the ultimate aim of attaining union with God. Membership in an Order can be formally sealed and the loyalty of the disciple to the master is, as a result, more closely monitored, but in most cases Sufi Orders are congregations of devotees that meet on a weekly basis. Commitment to the Order can be very informal and the relationship between devotee and sheikh may vary from being a close one to being inexistent. For a good introduction to religious life in Turkey, including a rich survey of

Despite the fact that the state prohibited the activity of Sufi Orders and closed their lodges in 1925, these distinctively Islamic organizations continued to operate in clandestine, and notwithstanding the governments' initial efforts to diminish the Sufis' societal influence, mystical orders had continued to be powerful forces for social and political articulation in Modern Turkey until today. In the early 1950s a less restrictive state attitude towards Islam transformed Sufism into a subliminal influence within the political landscape of the country. Traditional Sufi orders like the *Naksibendi* have a stronghold in some rural areas and significantly popular adherence among the urban poor. They were *de facto* integrated into the state machinery, together with Islamic groups such as the *Nurcus* movement, and have been effective in the founding and policymaking of Islamic parties ever since. Although a burgeoning middle class interest in these groups has shaped the boom in religious expression in recent years, orders like the *Naksibendi* do still mainly appear to be associated with the unprivileged. Initially banned, they continued their activities by providing religious education in secretive *madrasahs* (schools), offering support for needy people and politically mobilizing them and ultimately creating solid networks of communal solidarity that later on proved to be effective tools for political mobilization (Karasipahi, 2009).

Likewise, the same anti-Sufi approach common in Islamist discourses in other parts of the Muslim world has also been firmly uprooted since the 1990s in Turkey. A substantial amount of Islamist forces have been critical of Sufism because mystical Islam is often equated with popular piety (or with so-called 'folk' Islam) and in theological terms is seen as a de-

---

prominent works see Hendrich (2011).

viation, a corrupted expression of what they see as "normative" Islam. In particular, the use of music and of sung poetry in Sufi ceremonies has been subjected to recurrent and violent condemnations (Al-Maqdisee [2003]). Sufism is further criticized as being retrograde and unable to converge with modern whilst genuinely Islamic views on religious authority and relationships with God (Sirriyeh, 1999). Islamists seem to be competing to gain wider popular support in Turkey and elsewhere, among audiences traditionally supportive of the *tarikats*.

All these developments in the religious landscape have had a direct impact on the *White Turks'* position in society. For some, the increasing visibility of Islam in the public domain has served to reinforce their adherence to the secularist agenda of Kemalism even further. Yet for some others it has opened up the possibility to elaborate a form of inner criticism within and towards the secularist project. Among the secular middle and upper classes a timid yet increasing interest in Islam seems to be emerging. It has been suggested that this results from growing disillusionment with the secularizing agenda (Silverstein, 2007). Some present the case of Alevism and how the government has treated it, the headscarf issue, as well as the persistence of unofficial Islamic law tribunals in some rural areas as examples that attest the need for reviewing the State's pursue of secularism (Koker, 2010).

Part of this discontent seems to have recently been channeled by adherence to newly emergent forms of Islamic religiosity. I would contend that these are religious choices that challenge both the traditional religious trends more commonly adhered to by Black Turks and the *White Turks'* quite generalized anti-religious attitude. Typically new adherents to

Sufism will come to sympathize with a particular kind of Sufi religious movements. Despite the long-standing Turkish Sufi tradition as one of the main forces in articulating popular expressions of Islamic piety, these “new Sufis” are often not interested in the traditional *tariikat*. They are instead more prone to explore eclectic and post-modern spiritualities consisting of modern reformulations of Sufi doctrine (Silverstein, 2007).

To a certain extent, these new Sufis can be seen as converts to Islam. They have decided to embrace a religion they had prior little knowledge of, but some would prefer to state they have “returned”<sup>8</sup> to the practice of Islam. This “return” can be understood as the result of a proselytizing discourse, a feature typical of Muslim conversion narratives in which Islam is portrayed as the “original and natural state of being” and in which religious conversion is therefore understood to be a return to this primordial state. Alternatively, these new Sufis may consider themselves non-practicing but “culturally” Muslims, thus moving towards a more straight-forward Islamic identity in which cultural and religious aspects are integrated. Among them, there is a sense of keeping with the *White Turks’* intellectual tradition of looking at the West as a spring of moral motivation. This then is a new turn in the phenomena of cultural borrowings from Europe: instead of choosing among eminently Turkish

8 Scholars often consider this kind of religious follower a revert. The term ‘revert’ refers to someone who was born Muslim and after a period of religious disengagement comes back to practice Islam. Revert Muslims who make sense of their identity by endorsing beliefs are often strongly critical of the milieu they come from. Accordingly, Gilliat-Ray (1999) has suggested that in many aspects the experience of reversion to Islam bears significant similarities with the experience of conversion.

Sufi thought, or even among the increasingly widening of religious choices imported from the Arab World, they have turned to certain religiosities and groups that either originated or suffered major doctrinal transformations upon uprooting in western European and North-American societies (e.g Naqshbandi-Mujaddidis, Haqqaniyya, the Murabitun, Hazrat Inayat Khan’s movement among others). Embracing Islam is for this new generation of “revert” Muslims a way of continuing their looking at the West for sources of cultural, intellectual and now spiritual inspiration.

The new Sufi revival can be observed in the media and in bookshops both in Turkey and abroad, thereby contributing to the worldwide diffusion of Turkish culture. Today, most television channels offer programs on Islamic mysticism. Booksellers in Istiklal Caddesi and in other shopping areas of Istanbul consider titles on Sufism to be among the bestselling books. In those libraries, contemporary Turkish literature and Sufi classics are offered on sale in English and other world languages to satisfy the hunger and curiosity of the seven million tourists visiting Istanbul every year. Some of these works have been written by Turks and are now bestsellers not only in Turkey but also in the West. Elif Şafak’s prolific literary output evidences such development. In recent years, she has consolidated a position as one of the most relevant voices in Turkish literature. The works of this resident of Strasbourg, from 1997’s *Pinhan* (The Sufi) to 2009’s *Aşk* (The Forty Rules of Love: A Novel of Rumi), deal with a wide range of subjects related to Islamic mysticism and openly borrow from Sufi thought and cultural references. *Aşk*, Elif Şafak’s title which sold more than any novel in Turkey’s history, evidences the growing interest in this westernized version of Sufism.<sup>9</sup>

9 The novel explains the story of an

\* \* \*

In conclusion, this article tried to briefly sketch the discursive genealogies of the recent Sufi revival occurring in Turkey. It did so by presenting these new religious trajectories as reactions against the anti-religious stances that commonly characterize *White Turks'* attitudes towards Islam. I have argued that in feeling attracted towards Westernized modes of Sufi religiosities, formerly secular Muslims are keeping with their tradition of looking westwards for intellectual stimulation, yet, interestingly, are incorporating a religious, and somehow, Islamic element to it. It is perhaps early to forecast how this will fit into the *White* versus *Black* Turk disputes over national identity, but by integrating a religious and in particular a Muslim element into the Westernized identity pattern of secularism, they may run the risk of being accused by seculars of trying to come closer to Black Turkish ways and lifestyles. But is it really fair and accurate to consider them a newly emergent class of "Grey Turks"? I do not think so.

#### LIST OF REFERENCES

Al-Maqdisee Abu Muhammad Ibn Qudaamah, 2003. *Condemning the practices of those who claim Sufism*, Al-Ibaanah Book Publishing. Available at: <http://www.wiziq.com/tutorial/144036-Condemning>

Arakon, M., 2011. The Making of Modern Turkey and the Structuring of Kurdish Identity: New Paradigms of Citizenship in the

---

American Jewish woman who turns to Islam when she discovers the works of the 13th century founder of the Mevlevi order of whirling dervishes, Celaluddin Rumi. The book became so popular in Turkey that a grey-jacketed version was issued for male buyers seemingly too embarrassed to be seen holding the bright pink original edition!

Twenty-first Century. *Societal Peace and Ideal Citizenship for Turkey*, 49-69. 1 January.

Bein A., 2011. *Ottoman Ulema, Turkish Republic: Agents of Change and Guardians of Tradition*, Stanford University Press.

Cagaptay, S., 2004. Race, Assimilation and Kemalism: Turkish Nationalism and the Minorities in the 1930s. *Middle Eastern Studies*, 40, 3, 86-101.

Gilliat-Ray, S., 1999. 'Rediscovering Islam: A Muslim Journey of Faith'. In: Lamb C. and Bryant M. D., eds. *Religious Conversion: Contemporary Practices and Controversies*, London: Cassell.

Güldemir, U., 1992. *Texas-Malatya*. İstanbul: Tekin Yayınevi.

Hendrich, B., 2011. Introduction – Beyond State Islam: Religiosity and Spirituality in Contemporary Turkey, *European Journal of Turkish Studies*. Association pour la Recherche sur le Moyen-Orient. Available at: <http://ejts.revues.org/4527> (consulted 1 March 2013).

Heper, M., Toktaş, S., 2003. Islam, Modernity, and Democracy in Contemporary Turkey: The Case of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. *The Muslim World*, 93,2, 157-185.

Karasipahi, S., 2009. Comparing Islamic Resurgence Movements in Turkey and Iran. *The Middle East Journal*, 63, 1, 87-107. January 01.

Koker, L., 2010. A key to the "democratic opening": Rethinking citizenship, ethnicity and Turkish nation-state. *Insight Turkey*, 12, 2, 49-69.

Landau, J. M., ed.1984. *Atatürk and the modernization of Turkey*, Westview Press.

Sirriyeh, E., 1999. *Sufis and anti-Sufis: The defense, rethinking and rejection of sufism in the modern world*. Richmond, Surrey: Curzon.

Tokyay, M., 2012. Headscarf discrimination spills over into private sector, *SES Tür-*

*kiye*, 14th August. Available at: [http://turkey.setimes.com/en\\_GB/articles/ses/articles/reportage/2012/08/14/reportage-01](http://turkey.setimes.com/en_GB/articles/ses/articles/reportage/2012/08/14/reportage-01), (consulted 1 March 2013).

Yavuz, M. H., 2003. *Islamic political identity in Turkey*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Zubaida, S., 1996. Turkish Islam and National Identity. *Merip Middle East Report*, 26, 1, 10.

Zurcher, E. J., ed. 2004. *Turkey: a modern history*, I. B. Tauris.

*About the Author:*

Dr Marta Dominguez Diaz (MA & PhD School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London) is the Assistant Professor in Islamic Studies (Anthropology) at the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of St. Gallen, Switzerland. Some of her recent publications include: 'The One or the Many? Transnational Sufism and Locality in the British Būdshīshiyya.' In: Gabriel, T.; and Geaves, R. eds. 2013. *Sufism in Britain*, London: Continuum/Bloomsbury Academic; and 'The Islam of "Our" Ancestors; An "imagined" Morisco Past Evoked in Today's Andalusians' Conversion Narratives.' In: Larsson, G.; and Spielhaus, R. eds. 2013. *Europe with or without Muslims, narratives of Europe*, Journal of Muslims in Europe, Leiden: Brill.

e-mail: [marta.dominguez@unisg.ch](mailto:marta.dominguez@unisg.ch)