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ENCOUNTERING THE WEST: FRENCH EMBASSY
OF YIRMİSEKİZ ÇELEBİ MEHMET EFENDİ:
1720-1721

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the European states' increasing consolidation of military power, material wealth, and scientific knowledge began to change the balance of power against the Ottomans. The Ottomans became aware of this change through two defeats by the Austrian and the Russian Empires, resulting in the treaties of Carlowitz in 1699 and Pasarowitz in 1718. These defeats initiated a transformation in the Ottoman Empire's relations with the West; the Ottomans broadened their contacts with the West to allow cultural as well as military encounters. The eighteenth century marked a transformation in the Ottoman culture as Western ways of life were assimilated. In order to analyze the social aspects of this transformation, in this paper I wish to examine the account of an Ottoman ambassador who visited France in 1720.

The embassy to Paris is the first Ottoman cultural encounter with Western civilization. This cultural encounter reveals the different conceptual frameworks of the Ottomans and the French, and provides insight into the initial direction Westernization took in the Ottoman Empire. This study may give some insight as well into the processes by which a society encounters, receives, and assimilates a different culture.

The Ottoman embassy to France was made necessary by the international situation. After the two defeats, the Ottomans realized the importance of diplomacy; as for strengthening diplomatic relations, France was the logical first choice. Among the continental Western powers, France had the same adversaries as the Ottoman Empire: Russia and Austria. France had also long maintained satisfactory diplomatic relations with the Ottoman Empire. Grand vizir Damad İbrahim Paşa gave France the authorization to repair the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem in order to create a pretext for sending an ambassador and establishing good relations. The decision for the ambassador to be sent was made within the highest chain of Ottoman command.¹ In this case, Yirmisekiz Çelebi Mehmet Efendi was nominated.

¹Faik Reşat Unat, *Osmanlı Sefirleri ve Sefaretnameleri* (Ankara, 1968), pp. 17-19.

Mehmet Efendi² was the son of the head keeper of the sultan's mastiffs; he had joined the janissary corps and was known as "Yirmisekiz" because he belonged to the twenty-eighth battalion of the janissaries. Mehmet Efendi's most important qualifications were his being an Ottoman, from a specific janissary background, who was a literate and learned man with financial experience. His presence during the peace negotiations in Austria also qualified him as an Ottoman with the rare experience of having dealt with Westerners in a foreign culture.

His background enabled Mehmet Efendi to write one of the most important documents of Ottoman history, the *Fransa Sefaretnamesi*. *Sefaretnames* were reports prepared by ambassadors, who were sent abroad, to be presented to the Ottoman chain of command. The circulation of *sefaretnames* was limited to palace circles. In this case, a copy of the *Fransa Sefaretnamesi* was also published in Paris. The *sefaretneme* of Mehmet Efendi is the second known Ottoman *sefaretname* — the first one is that of Kara Mehmet Paşa, who was sent to Vienna in 1665.

In this paper, the concepts underlying Mehmet Efendi's account are analyzed to compare the Ottoman and French cultures. The main Ottoman-French differences emerge in how they draw the boundaries of private versus public life. The custom of disclosing living habits was totally new to the Ottomans. For the Ottomans, the boundaries of the living unit defined private boundaries. As d'Ohsson³ observes, the only living habit to be shared with and disclosed to people outside the household — and only to close friends at that — was eating. Household members and a few close friends were the only people present at meals; foreigners were never invited to Ottoman houses until the Tulip Period. The women and men also ate separately. The French, however, ate collectively with the participation of women. For the French, meals were occasions to come together, talk, and socialize. The Ottomans ate hastily and in total silence; European travelers were shocked at the speed with which the meals they had before their official reception were served. For the French, eating took a long time; there was plenty of talking during the meal, and haste was a sign of disrespect.

The Ottoman-French encounter brought these differences in eating manners to the surface. During Mehmed Efendi's visit, when the French asked to be invited to watch the Ottomans eat, Mehmed Efendi stated "since we were not accustomed to such behavior, this distressed us very much."⁴

²Mehmet Süreyya, *Sicil-i Osmani* (Istanbul, 1308, 1311), vol 4, p. 226; *Mufassal Osmanlı Tarihi* (Istanbul, 1962), vol. 5, p. 2441; İsmail Hami Danişmend, *İzahlı Osmanlı Tarihi Kronolojisi* (Istanbul, 1955), vol 4, p. 281.

³M. de M. d'Ohsson, *Tableau général de l'empire ottoman* (Paris, 1791), pp. 30-36.

⁴Two texts were used for quotations. The first is the French text edited by Giles Veinstein *Le paradis des infidèles: Yirmisekiz Çelebi Mehmed Efendi, ambassadeur ottoman en France*

The Ottoman-French cultural contrasts that emerged in relation to the concept of entertainment, on the other hand, consisted of the participation of women in social life, and of ballet and opera performances, which were unknown in Ottoman culture. Public festivities and plays were the only forms of entertainment the Ottomans had.⁵ The French operas, ballets, and concerts, however, were performed in specially constructed settings, were limited to a particular audience, and provided the opportunity for social gatherings and interaction. The most important aspect of the opera that caught Mehmet Efendi's attention was the change of scenery. Defining the *opere* as a play particular to the French where they show strange arts, he described the stage: "The curtain was raised suddenly and a great palace appeared behind it. In its courtyard, dancers and twenty fairy-like figures appeared in jeweled costumes and started singing a song together with the instruments."⁶ In Ottoman plays, the performers played different people and never identified themselves with a single character, therefore Mehmet Efendi was also affected by the passion with which the French actors and actresses played their sole parts.

All these French performances revealed how qualitatively different Ottoman and French notions of entertainment were. There were quantitative differences as well. Ottomans had fewer entertainment events than the French. The reason for this was pointed out by Ahmed Azmi Efendi, the Ottoman ambassador to Berlin in 1789, who complained "it is a strange habit of Europeans that... they take pride in themselves by bringing the traveler just to the banquets they give each other and they claim to have shown honor to the visitor."⁷ In the Ottoman Empire, receptions foreign ambassadors attended occurred solely in their honor; ambassadors were not generally invited to the feasts Ottomans gave each other.

Architecturally, Ottoman and French palaces, houses, and gardens differed in terms of both their exterior and interior designs. According to Lady Montagu, the Ottomans, in general, "are not at all solicitous to beautify the outsides of their houses; they build their houses quickly out of wood; one cannot distinguish either a front or wings. The gardens, harmonious with the rest of the house, consist of arbors, fountains, and walks thrown together in agreeable confusion."⁸ The visual complexity outside an Ottoman house contrasted with the simplicity inside. The principal piece of furniture in the house was the sofa. There were few accessories in the house. This description illustrates the public-

sous la Régence (Paris, 1981). The other is the Ottoman text published under the title *Récit de l'ambassade de Mehemet Effendi en France* (Paris, 1841). These two texts will hereafter be referred to as the French text and the Ottoman text. French text, p. 94; Ottoman text, pp. 26-27.

⁵For popular entertainment in the Ottoman Empire, see Metin And, *A History of Theatre and Popular Entertainment in Turkey* (Ankara, 1963), pp. 17, 18, 23.

⁶French text, pp. 115-118; Ottoman text, pp. 41-43.

⁷Ahmed Azmi, *Sefaretname* (Istanbul, 1303), p. 38.

⁸Robert Halsband, ed., *The Complete Letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu* (Oxford, 1965), p. 414.

private distinction; the outside of Ottoman houses was considered to be public, thus unattended; whereas the inside was considered private therefore well-maintained.

The difference in internal spatial construction caused difficulties for Mehmed Efendi and his retinue. When under quarantine at Sète in an old cathedral, Mehmed Efendi had to ask for a room filled with water closets to be emptied out to make room for a common gathering place. On the other hand, when he saw St. Cloud, Versailles, and Chantilly, Mehmed Efendi was impressed by the orderliness of the French gardens filled with water fountains, cascades, canals, and statues. He said, however, "to be frank, I was astonished that the French chose to spend so much money and attention on plain wilderness."⁹

Science and technology, another field of difference, was an important factor in Mehmed Efendi's voyage, as he was sent to France to visit fortresses and factories, and to make a thorough study of means of civilization and education and to report on those capable of application in the Ottoman Empire. Mehmed Efendi described the French military maneuvers and scientific developments, especially the Royal Observatory and mirror factory. The observatory impressed him the most; describing the telescope as "a field-glass with mirrors like a barber's laid in a ship's sail," and said the moon looked, "like spongy bread."¹⁰ In the Ottoman Empire, no institutional setting for sciences yet existed that could absorb, apply, and advance this scientific knowledge. This institution setting was gradually created through education.

Exchange of gifts was a custom regularly observed whenever diplomatic contact took place. The nature of the gift reflects the idealized values of the giver and receiving cultures as well as their assumptions about the acceptability of the gift to the other. Mehmed Efendi brought the French king equitation and warfare equipment like horses, bows and a sabre. The French regarded technological products as the prominent objects of their culture; Mehmed Efendi was given pendulum clocks, watches, and large mirrors. Based on assumptions about Islam, at the ambassador's request, the French decided to give Mehmed Efendi a diamond studded belt instead of the traditional gift of a portrait of the French king.¹¹

The Ottoman impact on France resulting from the embassy was the "Turquerie," the establishment of a Turkish fashion in "taste, attires, decoration and elegance"¹² for a brief period. The subsequent French impact on Ottoman society, however, was permanent. Aesthetically, a new taste emerged as the

⁹French text, pp. 157-158; Ottoman text, pp. 70-71.

¹⁰French text, pp. 150-151; Ottoman text, p. 64.

¹¹E. d'Aubigny, "Un ambassadeur turc à Paris sous la Régence," *Revue d'histoire diplomatique* 3 (1889):22

¹²Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar *Ondokuzuncu Asır Türk Edebiyatı Tarihi* (Istanbul, 1942), p. 9; Gündüz Akınca, *Türk-Fransız Kültür İlişkileri (1071-1859)* (Ankara, 1973), pp. 16-20.

Ottomans began to imitate French architecture, garden construction and design which gave a distinct coloring to the Tulip Period. The construction of *Sa'adabad* tried to imitate Versailles and Fontainebleau.¹³ Employment of detailed plans for aesthetics with new concepts of proportion and symmetry in building houses was new to the Ottoman.

The Ottomans had, throughout their history, emulated various products of the cultures they had come into contact with. The balance of power had then been in their favor. When the Ottoman Empire was an expanding power with an endogenous dynamism, it was able to mold these influences into an Ottoman synthesis. The encounter with the French in the eighteenth century, however, occurred as the balance of power was shifting against the Ottomans. The consequent Western cultural impact could not be absorbed by the Ottomans, and therefore molded a synthesis of its own—gradually eroding all the cross-cultural differences that have been delineated here.

This new synthesis was to produce a new mode of life and a new personality type in the Ottoman Empire. The leading Ottoman elite of the future was exemplified by Mehmed Said Efendi, son of Mehmed Efendi. He was approximately twenty-five years old when he joined his father on the embassy to Paris as his personal secretary. His experience with French culture and society affected him more than his father. Mehmed Said easily adapted to the French way of life and was fluent in French by the time of his return. He was the first Ottoman statesman to learn and speak French — or indeed any Western language.¹⁴ When sent to Paris in 1741 as an Ottoman ambassador, Mehmed Said "distinguished himself by his mastery of French language, customs, and manners. He was also very fond of operas, and the plays of the Comédie Française."¹⁵

The most important contribution of Mehmed Said Efendi to the Ottoman Empire was his establishment of an Ottoman printing press together with İbrahim Müteferrika.¹⁶ This seems to have been the singular most important technological consequence of Mehmed Efendi's embassy to Paris. There were some presses in the Empire prior to the establishment of the Ottoman printing press — these, however, printed books only in Hebrew, Greek or Armenian. Yet, as the skills and skilled personnel were already there, the introduction of printing in Ottoman was technologically possible.

¹³ İsmail Hakkı Uzunçarşılı, *Osmanlı Tarihi*, (Ankara, 1956), vol. 4, p. 163.

¹⁴ Niyazi Berkes, *The Development of Secularism in Turkey* (Montreal, 1964), pp. 35-36

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 194

¹⁶ For the history of the printing press in the Ottoman Empire, see Selim Nüzhet Gerçek, *Türk Matbaacılığı* (İstanbul, 1939).

All the other French technological products Mehmed Efendi encountered were too advanced, therefore impossible to produce in the Ottoman Empire. Ottoman society therefore resorted to importing them for consumption. French style architecture, furniture and decoration was quickly reproduced. As the customs associated with these cultural products also penetrated into the Ottoman way life, the basis for future cultural dichotomies was laid.

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