Profane Intuitions: Kurdish Diaspora in the Turkish City

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Contemporary analysis of the 'Kurdish question' in Turkey has often enough noted the recent explosion of Kurdish refugees and immigrants to the major Turkish cities. Interest in the re-constitution of Kurdish identity in the metropolis, however, has been less evident. This article seeks to identify some of the main themes that need to be addressed in any such investigation. It begins by arguing that discourse on the 'Kurdish question' often frames the Kurds, rather than the Turkish state, as the problem. The response of the Turkish Republic to such a problem has been to assimilate the Kurds. The struggle against assimilation then is the common theme binding the multiple visions and experiences of the Kurdish diaspora.

Introduction

In a discussion of the Kurdish question in Turkey, Kirişci and Winrow (1997) comment that Istanbul is now the biggest Kurdish city in the world. Though no figures are available for the actual number of Kurds living either in Istanbul or in the other major Turkish metropolitan centres, the same authors estimate that by 1996 more Kurds lived outside the east and south-east regions of Turkey—what in Ottoman times was known as Kurdistan—than within.1

Though Kurdish migration to the metropolises, both Turkish and European, has been a long-term trend, the escalation of the war between the PKK (Kurdish Workers Party) guerrillas and the Turkish Armed Forces has massively increased both the trauma and extent of migration.2 The study of population movements in the South-Eastern Anatolian

1. As part of the troubled politics of Kurdish identity, accurate figures for Kurdish populations in Iran, Syria, Iraq, the former Soviet republics and Turkey are not available. Yet the debate over the exact number of Kurds in Turkey (eight, ten, fifteen million?) is seen as originating in the confusion caused by the historic reluctance of the state to collect census data on ethnic background (for fear of encouraging that which it deniers) rather than in any theoretical hesitations over the fluidity of identity.

2. The recent collapse of the PKK movement, and the arrest, trial and sentencing of its leader Abdullah Ocalan has not of course solved the Kurdish problem. Nevertheless, it may have paved the way for more productive developments in the long term vis-a-vis state policies towards Kurds.
Project (GAP) region by Akşit et al. (1996), reveals that there has been net out-migration in all the five-year periods between 1965 and 1985, with higher than average national rates in the period 1970-85. The war then has clearly collided with processes already in train, as well as adding multiple new dimensions to them. Nigogosian (1996) reports, for example, that at least half the villages and hamlets in Tunceli province have been destroyed by the military, while Gürbey (1996) writes that over 2.5 billion acres of forest have been burned in south-east Turkey. A conservative estimate of at least 2 million internal refugees reveals the seriousness of the situation.

There is, however, much less known of migrant Kurdish experience in the exploding major cities, as well as how the experience of migration contributes to the re-constituting of Kurdish identity. Indeed, many of the more recent books on the Kurdish question are uninterested in ethnographic research and are obsessed with questions of geo-politics and international relations (Gunter 1990, Barkey and Fuller 1998). If their main concern is not the ramifications of the Kurdish problem for Turkey’s relations with the West, often enough they share the wider sins of the discipline of international relations as a whole. Foremost amongst these is its proclivity to take as given the very processes one would wish to problematise—the production of ethnicity, nationalism, subjectivity and identity.

In brief, Kirişçi and Winrow complain that there has been as yet no serious study of the political consequences of Kurdish migration, nor of the re-constitution of Kurdish identity in the metropolis. This is not quite true—there is, for example, Seufert’s (1997) article on the Kurdish-Alevi Koçkiri tribe in Istanbul. On the whole, however, the numerous studies on gecekondu settlements, even those concerned explicitly with problems of identity (i.e. G京eş-Ayata:1990/91) have not addressed Kurdish identity per se. This is hardly surprising, as modernisation perspectives and theories of ‘organic’ assimilation have dominated much of the research.

This article is a preliminary sketch then of some of the themes that might be taken into consideration in any more extensive ethnographic study of the production of Kurdish identity in the changed circumstances of a globalising Istanbul. It will do so by mapping the world of one particular family in Istanbul, not because its experience is necessarily representative of Kurdish urban experience in general, but because in the rich confusion of its members’ lives an intimation of the range of dilemmas constituting Kurdish urbanity in Turkey is revealed. Some of these dilemmas encompass changing family relations, the role and transformation of Kurdish Islam, Kurdish nationalism and the facilitation of Kurdish diaspora through global media flows like Mec TV. Before examining more closely the quotidian lives of my informants however, a brief excursion to the ‘Kurdish problem’ and the various ways it might be conceptualised will clarify the approach taken in this article.

**On the Kurdish question**

Delimiting the Kurdish problem is no straightforward matter. Different perspectives compete to define, and hence proffer remedies for it, though the denial of its very existence is also a common claim. Of course, denial of the problem’s existence, and denial of the existence of the Kurds are related: Turkish legislation aimed at the Kurdish regions has always sought both to narrate and legislate Kurdish identity out of existence. For example the 2nd article of the 1925 Eastern (i.e. Kurdish) Development Plan reads: 'those who use

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3. This paper is based on fieldwork carried out in Istanbul during the years 1995-1997, and funded by a Commonwealth of Australia post-graduate scholarship.
any language other than Turkish, in Government and Council offices and institutions, in schools, at the market or in the bazaar, are guilty of breaking the law and will be punished’ (Tunç 1993:49). Indeed, the project to assimilate Kurds was pursued so seriously that in the Education Department’s 1941 Turkish translation of the famous Leyden Encyclopaedia of Islam, the entry on ‘Kurds’, as I discovered to my surprise, had been doctored by omitting the section on Kurdish nationalism.

Sometimes the problem smells as rank—the ‘Eastern question’ is often puzzled over, as is the curse of ‘regional under-development’, with its concomitant condemnations of the area’s ‘feudal’ social structure, insufficiently transformed by a modernisation that ‘whetted the appetite of the Kurdish population without destroying the traditional order...’ (TOBB Report—Union of Turkish Chambers of Commerce and Commodity Exchanges, cited in Sakallıoğlu 1996:12).

The problem can also be approached according to its intimate relationships with other aspects of Turkish political life—for example, as the most important key to the flood of human rights violations documented by local and international NGOs (see Amnesty International 1996; Human Rights Watch 1996) or as a vital influence on the consistently tense relations between Turkey and its immediate neighbours, or as an element in the policies of the United States and the European Union states towards Iraq and the Middle East as a whole. The south-east region can be charted too by economic indices which document the level of unequal development that is at least partly responsible for rapid out-migration, as well as the increasing importance of the GAP (South-Eastern Anatolian Project) program with its planned 22 dams on the Euphrates and Tigris and large-scale irrigation and electricity schemes.

But grasping the broader dimensions of the Kurdish problem, indeed even its global diasporic and traditional dimensions, is no help in understanding it. Using a pithy phrase of Cornelius Castoriadis, I want to unravel the tangled skeins of the Kurdish problem into two separate but intimately related threads. In an article titled ‘Anthropology, philosophy, politics’, Castoriadis notes the enigma of knowledge concerning humanity: ‘this knowledge of man [sic] (in the objective genitive, knowledge about man) is also a knowledge of man (in the subjective and possessive genitive)—therefore ... man is at once the object and subject of this knowledge’ (1997:99).

It might be useful to apply this distinction to the Kurdish problem. What do we know of the Kurds? How can the problem they pose be solved? How shall they be managed? In this frame the problem of the Kurds is someone else’s problem—the Turkish state (or Syria, Iraq, Iran), the military, the functionaries and representatives of the ‘civilising’ agencies (e.g. teachers, doctors, health workers, judges, lawyers), the intellectuals, the political parties, concerned citizens, human rights campaigners and others. Such different groups or institutions will understand the particularity of the Kurdish problem according to the values that inform their modus operandi.

So for the Turkish state, the Kurds are a problem for its guardianship of the cultural homogeneity of the nation. For the armed forces, the Kurdish guerrilla resistance presents a threat to their instituted aim of defending the country’s territorial and national integrity. For the civilising bureaucracies, Kurds constitute an enormous challenge to the efficient carrying out of their duties (language problems, problems of access, of cultural difference) and post-PKK to their very presence in the region. For intellectuals, especially those employed at the state universities, the Kurdish problem represents an uncomfortable taboo that haunts the post-1980 coup reorganisation of the tertiary education sector with its self-aggrandising discourse of the independence of science and research. For the political
parties, pulling in the vote subsumes their interest in the Kurdish problem. For conscientious citizens, the effects of the Kurdish problem on the very checks and balances meant to generate democracy in the Republic as a whole dominates their concerns. For human rights workers, the Kurdish problem translates as a bottomless well of human suffering.

But the Kurdish problem is not just a problem for national security, for democracy or peace or for the rule of law, or even for the Turkishness of the nation. In Castoriadis’s formulation, the problem of the Kurds is at the same time the Kurds’ problem. Their very existence as Kurds, and what it means to be Kurdish becomes for them a matter of intense doubt. The Kurdish question is not merely a question then over what to do about the Kurds; it is also a question which the Kurds address to themselves, a question directed at the very nature of their subjectivity. Separated in this way, these two skeins are complementary, yet in being untangled double back upon each other. In doing so, the question, according to Castoriadis, becomes not a vicious circle but a circle of reflection (1997:100). The Kurdish problem is the sum then of the ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ knowledge of the Kurds, and of the interplay between these two.

In brief, contemporary Kurdish identity resides at the point of an intersection, the dangerous place where being (de-) constituted (assimilated) and constituting oneself collide. If constituting oneself involves disputation over how one is constituted (and hence a different knowledge of oneself and others), life for Kurds in a nation-state dominated by the Turks is very difficult. For being ‘Kurdish’, as a discursive outcome of various narratives defining the Kurd as problematic or non-existent, is tiring—in Baykan’s suggestive phrase (1993:55) this epistemic violence works to make Kurdish identity burdensome, even questionable by its ‘erasure of biography’.

The erasure of biography, however, is never mere abolition. It involves at the same time the bestowing of an alternative life-story and telos, an invitation to a replacement biography. And there are many Kurds who recite the ‘nature’ of Kurdishness as it is represented/constituted in Turkish state discourse, and hence do not wish to be Kurdish. For them Kurdishness equates with ignorance, uncivility, superstitiousness (religiousness) and backwardness, and without an interest in Kurdish politics. Yet the ‘inferiority’ of Kurds does not exclude their ‘perfectibility’ as Turks, once consent is given to the nationalising process. Kurds can become Turks by becoming modern, or change back into Kurds by re-interpreting the history that privileged Turks in that way. As we will see, this changing identity has both national and transnational dimensions.

Losing the family fortune

If the state’s project to erase the biography of Kurds has been, as the war attests, both consented to and violently opposed in the peripheries, we might expect that the reconstitution of Kurdish identity in the metropolis will partly reflect these same processes, but will add to them the peculiar socio-political determinants of the city. Among these is the ambivalent autonomy won by various groups to establish local communities even under the influence of the ongoing production of neighbourliness by the nation.

In order to ground some of these issues I now propose—a little reluctantly—to discuss the family of my best friend in Istanbul, a Kurdish family which migrated to Istanbul in 1984 from the environs of Bilis, long a region of heavy fighting and a city in which some of the worst assassinations of Kurdish journalists over the last few years have occurred. Reluctantly because I am only too aware of the temptation to treat as emblematic the
experiences and politics of a single family, tailoring them to illustrate the above discussion. Reluctantly too because, as always in the recounting of someone else's story, the storyteller transforms it into something new, giving it a meaning for others which it never possessed for those who lived it. The truth, we might observe, is not what it used to be.

Yet notwithstanding such misgivings, individual life stories still have an intrinsic interest of their own. But because subjects only become individuals in particular social, historical and gendered contexts, biographical notes sometimes reveal a commonality shared by any number of lives, lending them at the same time an interest beyond themselves, if only as exceptions that prove the rule. This interest 'beyond themselves' does not need to be based on some presumed ethnic essence common to all Kurds. For Şeyhmus's family, like any family, is particularly placed in a class, a religious and a cultural field—all of which makes its experiences and interpretations not socially universal but peculiarly mediated. Kurdishness then is differently lived among Kurds, and only in as much as we attempt to take such differences into account can the experiences of Şeyhmus's family be exemplary for elucidating some of the complex processes at work in the partial re-making of identity in the context of an imagined Kurdish diaspora.

Not only the Kurdish provinces as a whole, but Şeyhmus's family in particular have suffered a massive economic impoverishment over the past twenty years. The militarisation of the south-eastern provinces has not only severely damaged the regional economy, but has transformed its economic logic—a provisioning for battle (in whatever way) takes precedence over an economics with more civil intent. Here the employment of a civil militia recruited from amongst Kurdish villagers to work as village guards (kurucular) is a prime example. The ramifications of such developments are difficult to assess, especially as the normal institutional, media and judicial structures have been suspended in the areas under emergency rule. Trade and productive activity, requiring a minimum of legitimate and institutionally predictable legal frameworks to ensure their reproductive life, are obviously compromised in such circumstances.

Clues perhaps to the exclusion of the south-eastern provinces from the revised economic development strategy of the 1980s may be seen indirectly through various indices. For example, in the fourfold increase in Turkish exports in the wake of the 1980 stabilisation program, Turkey has moved from being primarily an agricultural to an industrial goods exporter. In 1980, according to Taşkin and Yeldan:

...57.5 per cent of the total exports were agricultural goods and only 35.9 per cent were industrial. By the end of the period [1990], the share of industrial goods had reached 79.4 per cent of the total exports whereas only 18 per cent of total exports were agricultural goods. (1996:159)

Given the way more developed areas suck capital and markets away from peripheries, the export boom has probably pauperised the south-eastern region, for which the economic mainstay has been farming and animal husbandry. The flow of scarce state resources in the form of tax rebates and high export subsidies to manufacturing has not aided the south-east, and may even have redistributed funds from east to west. Further, even if we note that agricultural exports have risen in dollar terms over the same period, regional disparities would call their representativeness into question. As with tourist revenues, the south-east region has been drastically disadvantaged. Lastly, we might note that in 1996 the
Government was forced for the first time to import live animals (from as far afield as Australia), since the livestock industry has been crippled in the south-east.\textsuperscript{4}

The loss of income (and status) by Şeyhmus’s family then is a reflection both of personal and regional decline. According to Şeyhmus, his father ‘owned’ three villages when he was growing up, all inherited from his grandfather, a substantial landowner and important religious leader (Şeyh) in the Bitlis area. Through a combination of circumstances, including the depredations of bad luck, ill-timed legal proceedings, bad decision-making, family feuding, as well as the unfolding of the political and historical processes alluded to above, Faruk Ağabey (Şeyhmus’s father) has managed to lose most of his fortune, planting now only the 500 dönüm he still controls.\textsuperscript{5} Deliberate state discrimination has not helped either. Concerned for example that some of the money would make its way to the PKK, the Government tobacco monopoly delayed buying the ‘Kurdish’ tobacco from the Bitlis area for two years in 1994/95, resulting in its gradual drying out in storehouses and subsequent loss of value. Faruk Ağabey now only plants crops in which non-state buyers are also actively involved.

The shift to Istanbul by Faruk Ağabey to study journalism in 1984 has not resulted however in a clean break from the village, for the economic livelihood of the family is still derived from the land in ‘Kurdistan’, even if the peasants once dependent on Şeyhmus’s father have in the recent past gained possession of the fields they labour in. Faruk Ağabey is obliged to spend about half of the year in Bitlis organising his farming, paying poorer villagers to drive the tractor (also hired—Şeyhmus told me that once they used to own the only tractor in the region),\textsuperscript{6} buying fertilizer and negotiating with either state or private concerns to buy the crop. With one foot in the city and one still in the village, Faruk Ağabey has become a divided man, unable to make the transition to capitalist factory-owner in Istanbul, nor regain the lands and status once enjoyed as a landlord in Bitlis. His

\textsuperscript{4} Some idea of the damage caused by the state’s policies can be gained from an open letter sent to the national government by the Beritan tribe (a self-association) through the good offices of \textit{Yeni Şafak} newspaper. The letter says: ‘We are the tribe worst affected by the war, as we make our living by breeding cattle. Because the state has banned access to pastures we are unable to continue to make our living. In 1995 we owned 650 to 700 thousand cattle and sheep, whereas today that number has fallen to 25 thousand. With the banning of access to pastures and state oppression, as well as the closing of Middle Eastern markets, our ability to survive as pastoralists is endangered. Previously we used to take our herds from Diyarbakır to paddocks in Erzurum, Bingöl and Muş. Now we are banned from using any of the roads. The road to Flâziş is able to be used if we pack the animals into trucks. But some of our families who have tried this have been detained by the soldiers in the Karakoçan area and have not been given permission to go on to Erzurum. We Beritan are living on the verge of poverty in tents like refugees. We call on all of those responsible to do their duty as our endurance in waiting is running out’. (\textit{Yeni Şafak}, September 1996—my translation).

\textsuperscript{5} One dönüm equals approximately 900 square metres

\textsuperscript{6} Şeyhmus told me also that his father used to own a purple Chevrolet, perhaps the only one in the country! A passing comment by Yüksel indicates that such conspicuous consumption was not however the strange prerogative only of Faruk Ağabey: ‘with the onset of electricity, in the villages where the Kurdish Naksıbendi aristocrats dwelt .. more refrigerators, dishwashing machines, televisions-videos could be encountered than in the villages of middle Anatolia and the Aegean .. Similarly before the use of automobiles was widespread in many Anatolian regions, in the villages where the Kurdish şeyhs lived automobiles were in plentiful supply’ (Yüksel ‘93 108-109).
disappointment at his failure to achieve the goals he had hoped for renders him particularly sensitive to slights or perceived lack of respect by others. This in turn has bedevilled many of his attempts to enter into partnerships with other Kurdish businessmen in Istanbul, leaving him curiously isolated and perhaps overly prone to carping dissatisfaction with the behaviour and choices of his wife and four children.

Şeyhmus, who like Faruk Ağabey is a brilliant observer of cultural conceits, claims that in Kurdistan the expectations incumbent on ruling families bring them to a precipice: symbolic/moral domination requires wealth, and one has to give much to earn the respect of people. That is, reckless generosity is a desirable and admirable trait, but runs the risk of exhausting one’s reserves, given the constant struggle for the high moral ground. This is one reason why Şeyhmus himself has no intention of ever returning to the village—he has seen at first hand the pressures (impossibility?) of maintaining symbolic dominance with a dwindling supply of capital. But even for the wealthy, public respect and acknowledgment is earned not merely by wealth (though without it high social status is not possible) but also by virtue—so Şeyhmus told me that when Ramazan came around his family, while eating lunch, would draw all the curtains and bolt the doors to avoid public opprobrium during the fast. But if Şeyhmus’s father had to give to remain an ağa (landlord, master), he would be recompensed in return by political influence (e.g., were he to stand for Parliament he would be assured of a block of votes), availability of labour, and symbolic deference (what we might call ‘psychological protein’). As these feudal arrangements break down Faruk Ağabey’s children are in transition to other nodes in the economy. Thus a narrative of decline is intertwined with a narrative of social activism, of fingers activated to plug holes (wider kinship ‘fingers’), of bribery and courts, of the educating of children, and political alignment with the most radical of the Kurdish groups, the PKK.

Fractured family and ‘legitimate’ domination

One major tension created by the family’s migration to Istanbul has been the vastly increased independence of the family’s daughters, and the unhappy negotiations this has engendered between Faruk Ağabey his oldest son and able but unwilling lieutenant in domestic matters Şeyhmus, and the two girls For though Şeyhmus claims to have renounced his cultural privilege of controlling the lives of his mother, younger brother and sisters, his father’s regular absences from the Istanbul house cast him in the role of supervising both the financia: and household affairs of the family. The return of Faruk Ağabey brings further stress, especially to Şeyhmus, as he may be prevailed upon to find out why his sister has not been working well at university for example, or who she is associating with. The discursive practice of ağabey-ness (elder brotherliness), as a key element in the ideology of patriarchy, is not of course all bad for the ağabey, despite (or maybe because of) the profession of self-sacrifice: the good ağabey does not abuse his legitimate authority but rather suffers self-deprivation for the sake of his weaker siblings. Hence ağabey-ness is a discourse of power constrained by a discourse of sacrificial obligation—the ağabey is strong because the others are weak, which is why the ağabey has to be sensitive to their frailty. To put it differently, ağabey-ness is an act of domination mediated by acts of refraining from domination. Like many instances of ‘legitimate’ and

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7. The mother of one of my friends told me that in the Black Sea region of her village, girls who had never had an ağabey found it more difficult to marry, the assumption being that they would not have learned to obey, nor have been ‘broken in’.
ordered inequality, only when exercised tyrannically does it become unbearable. On the other hand, constant acts of petty or domestic intransigence demonstrate that the parameters of submission are under permanent review.

Yet if Şeyhmus’s sisters are educating themselves (with Faruk Ağabey’s blessing and full support), Şeyhmus’s mother Suheyla Abla is caught up in another world. Though trained in her father’s house in the sciences of Islam (she can speak and read Arabic, and has studied some basic Islamic jurisprudence fikh), Faruk Ağabey’s militant cynicism towards Islam has delegitimised her areas of expertise. Faruk Ağabey would never consider Qur’an readings in his house nor allow her (if she wanted) to attend women’s meetings for religious/social purposes. And as Şeyhmus’s family has no other relatives in the city, the main guests are friends of the children or occasional travellers from the village. These visitors are always treated very formally, with special concern given to presenting a picture of family order useful for shoring up political capital back in the village.8

Indeed my own moment of heresy occurred when I went upstairs to ask Suheyla Abla a question while Faruk Ağabey was hosting a man from the village in the lounge-room. Suheyla Abla said later that her husband had interpreted it as an affront to his ordering of gender relations in his own home: the visitor would have told them back in Bitlis that a yabancı (stranger) was familiar with the women, shaming Faruk Ağabey. According to Suheyla Abla, the exclusion of the women, even from male relatives, was considered aristocratic, and not many commoner families could afford to do so. İnsallah (God willing) she said, when I asked her if the PKK was working to change such a situation. Şeyhmus, not surprised at his father’s offended reaction, commented rather sadly, ‘You see what it’s like living in an ignorant society.’ For though the practice of gender separation serves the needs of the landlord class by emphasising their difference and superior virtue from the people (and hence, ultimately, their fitness to extract labour from them), its necessary continuing reiteration in the context of declining wealth becomes a burden on the family.

Thus although Şeyhmus is particularly astute in his understanding of village culture, and although Faruk Ağabey’s critique, even disregard, of the cultural expectations of Kurdish society is thorough and ongoing, on the subject of the ‘honour’ of the women non-conformist behaviour is rather less in evidence. Şeyhmus too was careful to ensure appearances were kept up—once when Faruk Ağabey was away in the village, Şeyhmus made me leave the house early in the day with him because there was an old lady staying there, and he didn’t want her to report that a yabancı was at home alone with his mother and sister. Having two educated daughters was one way Faruk Ağabey could show his freedom from the social conventions of the villagers. His daughters would be, in true Kemalist fashion, modern but modest. Yet if his daughters were to contribute to the struggle for an independent Kurdistan, he would not allow his wife any self-governance, let alone float the possibility of autonomy or independence from his rule. In an echo of Binnaz Toprak’s argument that the Republic legally emancipated women (from Islam) but did not liberate them, Faruk Ağabey’s modernism vis-à-vis his daughters is refracted through a more important nationalist logic, whereby women as political subjects are constituted as

8. Interestingly, the privilege of answering the telephone too was ordered hierarchically: Faruk Ağabey was the first line of defence: if he was not home Şeyhmus would pick up the earpiece. Only if Şeyhmus or Faruk Ağabey were away would Suheyla Abla’s quiet ‘efendim?’ interrupt its ringing. The jangle of the telephone then, like a knock on the door, was felt as the outside world’s approach to the family, and needed to be met with the appropriate face (or voice), at least until the caller’s status is clarified.
Kurdish before feminist, or as feminist only for the sake of the new society of justice needing to be built.

**Profane intuitions and Kurdish Islam**

Suheyla Abila’s early religious training indicates that her family was self-consciously Muslim. But it would be wrong to conclude that Faruk Ağabey’s family was any less knowledgeable. In fact Suheyla Abila and Faruk Ağabey are first cousins, Suheyla Abila’s uncle being Faruk Ağabey’s father. Not only this but Faruk Ağabey’s father was a famous Şeyh (head of a religious order), whose title has come down to Faruk Ağabey. Exiled in different towns during his long life, Faruk Ağabey’s father attracted müritler (disciples) wherever he stayed. His tomb near Bitlis has become a place of pilgrimage during Kurban Bayram (the Festival of Sacrifice), local villagers and faithful disciples from all over the country gathering to wash his grave and cook the slaughtered animals at the side of the family mescid (small mosque). At the end of the day the meat, rice and other foods are collected and taken on trucks to be distributed to the outlying villages. According to Suheyla Abila thousands of people come each year, and Faruk Ağabey always provides a significant number of the animals for slaughter.

Suheyla Abila lived in Syria when a child, as her family too was forced to flee to Damascus during a revolt in the 1950s. When they returned they moved to Diyarbakir, where her father banned them from ever walking across the park in which the Kurdish leaders of the 1925 Şeyh Sait uprising were hanged by the Istiklal Mahkemesi (Independence Tribunal) and then buried in an unmarked pit without proper preparatory procedures by their families. Suheyla Abila said a large Atatürk statue stands somewhere near where the gallows stood. People, like elephants, have long memories and stories of suffering or injustice are passed down in whispers as ugly rumours and disreputable counterweights to the official transcriptions of history, to the power of state-sponsored sanctuaries for secular pilgrimage (such as parks) that are sometimes built over the very bones of earlier lives. Wallace Steven’s poem ‘A Postcard from the Volcano’, expresses what profane intuitions divine:

Children picking up our bones
Will never know that these were once
As quick as foxes on the hill;
And that in autumn, when the grapes
Made sharp air sharper by their smell
These had a being, breathing frost;
And least will guess that with our bones
We left much more, left what still is
The look of things, left what we felt
At what we saw...
We knew for long the mansion’s look
And what we said of it became a part of what it is... Children
Still weaving budded aureoles,
Will speak our speech and never know
Will say of the mansion that it seems
As if he that lived there left behind
A spirit storming in blank walls...

(Stevens 1990)
Poets, however, are not the only ones who fail to conceive that the nation-state itself is
the institution that seeks to prevent children guessing that, along with the bones, they are
also left with 'what still is the look of things, what we felt at what we saw', or that 'what we
said of [the past] became a part of what it is.' For the nation-state is also the great town
crier. It feeds on the corruptibility of both the flesh and the memory to exhume its own
heroes, build its monuments, dedicate its fountains and squares and public buildings to
right-thinking citizens of its founding era. It organises ceremonies of public grief for those
fallen in its service. It curses its betrayers. Sometimes they become one and the same
person. In remembering a past to mourn and celebrate it also constructs a present to fear
and condemn. Organising the 'division of grief' is among the nation-state's most vital
tasks. Yet sometimes the very act of erasing what the state wants forgotten causes it to live
on. So Suheyla Abla's father saw not a park but a graveyard, a graveyard inhabited by
'storming spirits' 'never finally mourned. Perhaps Suheyla Abla's profane intuition partly
illuminates Şeyhmus's claim that although many Kurds are now discovering their
Kurdishness, his family has always been aware of their ethnic separateness and their rights.

However, even if this is true, Şeyhmus's grandfather was obviously Kurdish in a
different way to both his son and his grandson. Faruk Ağabey like his father is intimately
familiar with the close relationship between Sunni Islamic practices and local culture,
conforming to and manipulating its structuring of social life when appropriate in the
village. But he himself is an atheist, and is particularly unsympathetic towards Islamist
prescriptions for organising the political sphere, arguing in rather romantic terms that the
Kurds' conversion to Islam resulted in the extinguishing of local political traditions,
including the public participation of women in decision-making. If Faruk Ağabey's father
expressed his dissent from the regime of the day through some form of religious discourse
(resulting in his occasional exile), Faruk constructs his in more nationalist vein.

Here in one generation we have a transition from an oppositional identity clustered
around Islamic tropes (with a potential for de-politicising ethnic differences between
peripheralised Kurds and village or rural Turks by a common culture of resistance to a
perceived anti-Islamic centre), to an identity constituted in more discrete ethnic categories,
wherein alliances between Kurdish and Turkish subjects become problematic. Among
other things, this corresponds with the re-ivgoration of state-sponsored Turkish
nationalism in the wake of the 1980 coup. This transition is also articulated with the
urbanisation of Turkish society, in which the centre itself is 'rationalised' and its production
of a polemical Westernised distinction or civility is muted. In the difference between Faruk
Ağabey and his father we are confronting not the sudden invention of ethnic Kurdishness
but the changing of its meaning over time.

**Profane intuitions and Kurdish nationalism**

Faruk Ağabey's children too are Kurdish in a way different to their grandfather,
nationalists who if not totally ignorant of village life (Şeyhmus at least) are not interested
and only imperfectly acquainted with any form of Islamic living. Unlike many Kurds
brought up in Istanbul, the Kurdish of the children is very good—so good in fact that the
eldest daughter is in demand to translate foreign poets into Kurdish, and has completed
several books. Her husband Renzi is one of the few publishers of texts in Kurdish in
Turkey, though his potential market is not large—the Turkish Republic's educational
policies have ensured that the emergence of Kurdish as a literary language in Turkey
(unlike in Iraq) has not occurred Şeyhmus claims the result has been an artificial freezing
of the Kurdish dialects in Turkey; having been unable to develop 'normally', they don't have any words for the constitutive elements of modernity.

This is not a problem unique to Kurdish. Asad argues, for example, that since the nineteenth century modern Arabic has undergone a thorough lexical, grammatical, and semantic transformation, becoming more like European languages than it was in the past. 'Such transformations signal inequalities in the power (i.e. in the capacities) of the respective languages, in relation to the dominant forms of discourse that have been and are still being translated' (Asad 1986:158). Turkish, it is true, has had the dubious benefit of the state's Turkish Language Institute periodically protesting at the bastardisation of the language. Kurdish in compensation has Kubra (Şeyhmus's sister) making up new Kurdish words while translating from English. Yet if all languages are increasingly impregnated with the discursive categories of modern forms of knowledge (both technical and social), the banning of Kurdish in Turkey for 70 years has ironically prevented its participation (on whatever terms) in such a 'rejuvenation'. 'Purity' in this case leads not to the salvaging of Kurdish but to its obsolescence. Living languages incorporate new words with their associated range of contested meanings that both allow the elucidation of new practices and choke off the unproblematic continuation of the old. The ban on Kurdish has locked the language out of this process, ambivalent as it may be.

How does Faruk Ağabey, as a bilingli Kurd 9, think about the Kurdish problem? In what sense is it accurate to call him a Kurdish nationalist? And in which way is his identity different to his father's? For Faruk Ağabey himself says that he does not want a Kurdish Parliament, but a Parliament of Kurdistan, a Parliament composed of representatives of all the minority ethnic and religious groups in 'Mesopotamia'. This is in keeping with Faruk Ağabey's claim that many of the members of the Turkish Parliament are not Anatolian at all but from backgrounds in what is now Bulgaria, the former Yugoslavia, Greece, Georgia etc. Indeed he argues that the Republic is a göçmen (immigrant) regime in which the elite are cut off from their own roots and tradition, and have become more Turkish than the Anatolians (Turks or otherwise). This göçmen elite are thus doubly displaced, both counterfeit Turks and traitors to their own ethnic identity. They are accused too of having founded a militaristic, oligarchic and devşirme state, a state which has attacked the traditions (and religion) of the local people on behalf of the English and French. Devşirme was the word used to describe the levy (recruitment) of Christian boys to be trained as Janissaries (soldiers and bureaucrats) in the Sultan's service. For Faruk Ağabey the word refers to the process of losing one's culture, traditions and morals, as well as servitude to the authority of another, with its associated lack of honour. As evidence Faruk Ağabey runs through the list of the presidents of the Turkish Republic, most of whom came from göçmen families. Faruk Ağabey's devşirme theory gives the nod to non-essentialist notions of identity, in acknowledging that people can become Turks or Kurds. Nevertheless, the verbs turkleştirmek (to make Turkish) or turkleşirilmek (to be made Turkish) are used in the context of an essentially true identity, the identity that is being given up. Disloyalty, then, is a ground for eviction from the palace of legitimate authority.

9 Bilingli can be translated as conscious or aware, Şeyhmus used it to describe Kurds who know their own history. Compare this with şuurtu Muslims (also meaning conscious or sensible), the word used by some Islamists to distinguish themselves from other non-Islamist Muslims. Both categories seek to express the possibility, even the necessity of subjects achieving a further awareness, knowledge or commitment, setting up the potential for a rivalry between them.
‘Med TV’: facilitating Kurdish diaspora

Faruk Ağabey’s deconstruction of the founding myths of the Turkish Republic has been reinforced by his decision to buy a satellite-sensitive antenna specifically to pick up the broadcast from England of the PKK’s illegal television channel, Med TV.10 Med TV itself is a reflection of the incredible explosion of electronic media in Turkey over the last five years or so. Since 1990, when the first pirate television channel began beaming experimentally into Turkish cities via satellite from Europe, Turkey has moved, as Ayşe Öncü comments, ‘from a scarcity of images directly controlled by the state, to an abundance of them, fuelled by competition among increasing numbers of commercial channels’ (Öncü 1995:23). By 1996 no less than 1058 local, 108 regional and 36 national radio stations, and 229 local, 15 regional and 15 national television stations (secular and Islamist) were broadcasting across the country (Yeni Yüzyıllı, 9 October, 1996). In this sense Med TV, which started its transmission in 1995, is just one more facilitator of the babble of words, music, images, and propaganda encircling the globe. But its disputation of state television’s official version of the problem in S.E. Turkey, as well as its contradiction of the coverage of the closely-censored (but occasionally revealing) commercial channels, has led the state to declare its viewing a crime. Enforcing such a decree is of course another matter.

Private television gains its revenge on the state’s regulation of its political content (through the notorious Anti-Terror Law, Article 8 of the Constitution), not merely through its marginalisation of the state channels by the stealing of their viewers, but by its unintentional commodification of the images on Turkish Radio Television (TRT). With the advent of Islamist stations packaging a contrary Islam, TRT’s creation of a world view and coverage of state and government affairs, once seen as uncontroversially educative, is now demystified, relativised as but one self-interested perspective among others. At the same time its content too has had in part to shift from presenting useful information for its ideal ‘citizen-viewer’ towards entertaining a heterogeneous and often ill-educated, even uncivilised consumer.

If commercial television has transformed the way the audience watches state television—marginalising, commodifying and relativising it—it is striking how closely Med TV, with its limited resources, resembles TRT. Öncü’s summary of the historic intent of TRT’s radio and TV coverage: ‘the creation of a sense of national unity, through homogenised official Turkish, national folkloric music, a shared sense of historic occasion, and loyalty to the nation’ (1995:25) could also be a description of Med TV. It too addresses its viewers as prospective members of a national community, disseminating an assumed shared knowledge while constituting a political subjectivity. So one of the evening programs is a fascinating game show which awards no prizes save a nationalist glow. In it a youth panel of both sexes answers questions on Kurdish history, Kurdish literature, on landmark geographical sites in Turkish Kurdistan, on Marxist-Leninism and on famous Russian writers like Gorky. Şeyhmus’s family gathers around the television and answers the questions as well. Like TRT, Med TV too is concerned to nurture ‘Kurdish’ folk dance, national costumes and music. Like TRT, it propagates a standardised Kurdish, as it teaches literacy to children whose first language may be Turkish, German or Swedish. News is presented first in Kurdish (Kurmanji) and then repeated in Turkish for those Kurds who speak a different dialect (e.g. Zazaki).

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10. Med TV is currently broadcasting from Holland, as pressure from the Turkish Government has forced its closure and relocation several times.
However, unlike TRT, Med TV is not the handmaid of a nation-state. Rather it expresses resistance to a coercive Turkish identity used as one of the foundations for the official culture of the Republic. On the other hand the PKK’s possession of a technology that was not so long ago the sole privilege of the state confounds the distinctions between ‘nationalist critical longing and nostalgic or eschatological visions, [and] actual nation building—with the help of armies, schools, police and mass media ... A certain prescriptive anti-nationalism ... need not blind us to differences between dominant and subaltern claims’ (Clifford 1994:307). The establishment of a Kurdish Parliament-in-Exile signals the building up of a state in absentia, a state with no territory to manage (no liberated zones) except, with the aid of Med TV, the private sphere of the home.

Do its programs beamed to both Europe and Turkey encourage an homogenisation of modes of response to the Kurds’ vastly different migration experience in cities like, for example, Berlin, Copenhagen, or Istanbul? For Şeyhmus’s bilinci Kurdish family in Istanbul, life is lived as a kind of exile, as part of a diaspora of an imagined nation that is not yet. Kurdish nationalism results in the creation of a diaspora more willed than passively experienced. bilincisi (unaware) Kurds are simply not part of it. In Faruk Ağabey’s case the homeland as an imagined memory is only tangentially related to the cultural practices of Kurds living in Kurdistan. This notion of diaspora simultaneously serves to provide a cultural critique—the imagined homeland purged of customs unworthy of preservation, as well as those obstructing the exiles’ return to their future. Faruk Ağabey’s exile in Istanbul condemns him to a disconnectedness from everyday life in the general community. For not only is Faruk Ağabey distinguished from his occasional village visitors by his status, knowledge and eloquence, but the making of new Kurdish political myths and community is a dangerous practice, liable to unwelcome gate-crashing by the security forces.

Further, Faruk Ağabey (and even more so Suheyla Abia’s) isolation is not helped by their choice of housing, having rented since their arrival in Istanbul apartments in various city sitês, those post-1980 clusters of uniform high-rise residential blocks sprouting up along the highways and byways of the metropolitan area. Advertised as places capable of screening out the undesirable cultural pollutants of Istanbul living, sité lifestyle is popular partly because of its homogeneity. Thus at Şeyhmus’s sité, where the kapicilar (cleaners/caretakers) were at first housed in the basements of the apartment buildings, the complaints of residents that kapici children were cluttering up the playground forced the manager to expel them from their cellars to trudge in from their rented flats in the sea of slums surrounding the sité oasis to deliver the fresh bread at six o’clock in the morning. That most of them were Kurds was probably no coincidence.

Finally, if Med TV facilitates a private diasporic Kurdistan in the belly of Istanbul, is it contributing at the same time to the winnowing of Turk from Kurd in the ‘Turkish’ diaspora in Europe? For part of its news each night is devoted to the protests: activities of Kurds in the various states of Europe, as well as their clashes, physically or polemically, with more nationalist Turkish groups in tune with the Turkish consulates. Precisely because modern Kurdish nationalism is diasporic it is also ‘born global’. The coagulating of Kurds under the banner of the PKK in countries as distant from Turkey as Australiz and Canada, and their collecting of money to support the movement suggests the discourse of Kurdish nationalism is reorganising the ethnic politics of immigrant communities in the metropolitan countries as well. In countries with large and well-organised Kurdish populations, Turks may not only be stigmatised as foreigners and aliens in racist domestic discourses of state or civil society but as oppressors of Kurds to boot, hardly worthy of much sympathy. Though Med TV itself cannot be watched in Australia, Kurdish
nationalism as a transnational practice is politicising Kurdish subjects (in the context of the national policy of multiculturalism) in Sydney as much as those living in Istanbul or Frankfurt. The first Zazakî (a Kurdish dialect) radio program in the world made its debut in Melbourne in 1997 on one of the multicultural/multilingual stations, while Australia was host to the first Kurdish program outside the Middle East, when ethnic radio broadcast in Kurdish in 1982 (Hassanpour 1997:78).

Conclusions

In short the double, ambivalent life of Şeyhmus’s family in Istanbul is structured not so much by the exclusion of Kurds on the basis of their difference (and inferiority) but, on the contrary, by the state’s determination to include Kurds forcibly within an ethnic Turkish norm. Similarly, if recent Kurdish migrants to Istanbul now meet with some fear and loathing from native Istanbulites (themselves earlier migrants), this is probably due as much to the existence of the PKK movement itself, as to any deep conviction of racial superiority. The double life of Şeyhmus’s family arises not merely because the disdain they feel for the regime and its justifying myths, and the illegal activities they pursue to bring about its collapse, are kept hidden from their neighbours. It is double also because diasporic living is characterised by both resistance to ‘host’ states, but also by inevitable numerous accommodations to the normalising processes of the wider society itself. Diaspora is constructed by subjects constantly winning the battle while losing the war. For Şeyhmus’s family diaspora is lived as a struggle against assimilation.

But what is envisaged by assimilation policies as the desired new norm is of course peculiar to the particular historical context. The verb ‘to assimilate’ suggests a journey from one identity to another. It is also a journey to which a moral economy is affixed. Arrival is good or bad not only according to whether the traffic was voluntary or compulsory, but dependent on the social valuation of the old self abandoned or the new self embraced. The definition of the identity from which one departs and the identity which one attains is overtly laid down by the dominant power in its transforming project. Successful assimilation is demonstrated only by conformity to a few key symbolic markers—resistance to assimilation by non-conformism to those same signifiers.

The human targets then of nation-state homogenising projects are defined (in their essential nature) by their divergence from the prescribed ideal; just as that ideal is constructed out of the targets’ ‘essential’ nature. If in the single party period Kurds’ successful transition to Turkishness was represented by their becoming modern, and symbolised by their adoption of neckties or abandonment of the fez, Turkishness was marked by not knowing modern Turkish, or by an allegiance to ‘fanatical’ Islam. The tokens, however, of ‘having arrived’ are not fixed but change over time, even if the state does not renounce its assimilatory project.

Indeed, assimilation politics pursued by the state often result in an incessant politics of exclusion—paradoxically, given their raison d’être in the moral ideal of equality and social harmony. For once the desired identity is sketched out, and the corresponding deficiency of the ‘assimilées’ noted, the process is put in place for the exclusion of those who cannot or refuse to transform themselves. As long as assimilation is considered incomplete i.e. as long as assimilation as a policy is pursued, those who have not yet commenced their journey or who have dallied somewhere along the way become the targets of state hostility and intervention, of reports, lies and damned statistics. Given the abstract nature of the desired qualities (i.e. civilised, courteous, Turkish, Australian, American, modern etc.)
and the pinning down of their meaning only by recourse to the presumed clarity of their antonyms, the bar is capable of being forever raised, resulting in an official politics that is inherently (and ironically) exclusivist. Perhaps Kurds’ successful assimilation nowadays is signified less by becoming Republicans and more by conspicuously consuming the paraphernalia of commodity nationalism, especially the national flag.  

But when Şeyhmus’s brother goes to watch Beşiktaş play soccer is he assimilating? And is it only Muslims who are contaminated by parking in the underground car park of Istanbul’s newest shopping malls and ascending in the elevator to buy fashionable clothes in Benetton, an international company? Identities, especially those projected as normative by the discourse of the nation, have as has been noted their own specific tests of loyalty, their own special hoops to jump through. Other facets of subjects’ lives that do not explicitly oppose this primary identification are not directly subject to the state’s censure. (But identities at conflict with the state’s discourse on civility may also meet with official displeasure.) So Turkish nationalism may not have much to say now about the production of consumer identities by the incorporation of more and more goods and services into the cash economy, or the increasing commodification of social life. Despite the ceaseless efforts of nationalist discourse to construct ‘pure’ identifications, hybrid identities may in fact rule, but this ‘does not necessarily mean that “hybrids” identify with [them]’ (Diken 1997:175).

In sum, the difficult life of Şeyhmus’s family in Istanbul derives not from state practices that stress difference between Turks and Kurds, but by policies designed to render them identical. At the same time Faruk Ağabey’s inability to extricate himself from an economic dependency on the village (and the village’s ambiguous relationship with both the national economy and the national war12) leaves him vulnerable to local challenges directed at both his symbolic and economic dominance. Moving to Istanbul has heralded an attempt to both shore up and renew symbolic and economic capital. In Istanbul the family has sought anonymity in the relatively homogeneous social space of the middle class sîte. Here, in contrast to the oppositional locality produced by Kurds in the informal neighbourhoods and squatter housing of the city, Şeyhmus’s family lives in proud solitude, polite to neighbours but reluctant to borrow even a cup of sugar. Significantly, their decision to come to Istanbul was neither an example of chain migration nor did it involve the activating of kinship links. And equally telling, Şeyhmus’s family has not been the nodal point for a trickle of subsequent immigrants from the village to the city. In their case Kurdish nationalism is not a discourse hailing subjects from the rural poor but from the Kurdish aristocratic feudal class.

Finally, to what extent this seemingly self-defeating construction of an isolated diaspora is exemplary for other Kurds in the major Turkish metropolises is difficult to quantify.

11. One indication of the legal pressure applied to people to display the national flag was the recent four-month gaol sentence given to members of a legal political party for not hanging the flag from the party headquarters on Cumhuriyet Bayramı (Republic Day) (Yeni Şafak, 26 February, 1996).

12. Gülay Günlik-Şenesen writes that in 1994, 20% of the total world arms trade was delivered to Turkey. The USA is by far the major supplier. In 1995 the general budget allocations to the Ministries of Defence, Education and Health were 11.5, 10.1, and 3.6% respectively. But the budget allocation to the Defence Ministry is only one source of arms funding. There is also the Defence Industry Support Fund, which is financed, among other sources, by taxes on income, fuel consumption, alcohol, cigarettes and transfers from the national lottery (See Günlik-Şenesen 1995).
Clearly, however, such secular Kurdish nationalism does not draw dry the well of contemporary Kurdish identity. Sunni Kurdish Islamists, for example, imagine a different utopian Kurdish city against which the experiences of Istanbul life are judged and found lacking (see Houston 1997). Any more extensive study of the political consequences of Kurdish migration will need to dwell on the multiple visions and experiences of diaspora informing the profane intuitions of Kurds in the Turkish city.

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