

TURKISH-AFRICAN SOCIAL AND CULTURAL RELATIONS: REFLECTIONS.

BY

MOHAMED BAKARI

FATIH UNIVERSITY, ISTANBUL

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Historical background:

Turkish-African social and cultural relations predate the founding of the Turkish Republic in 1923, and go back to the predecessor Ottoman Empire. At its height the empire encompassed large parts of what is today described as the Balkans, which included modern Greece, large parts of North Africa, the present Middle East and at its core was the Asia Minor. By the late nineteenth century, and rather belatedly, through the Mamluk dynasty in Egypt, was already finding its way into the Sudan in the shape of the Anglo-Egyptian condominium. Westwards, it had already insinuated itself into some areas of West Africa. Where it had not established its physical presence in the form of military or bureaucratic presence, it had established diplomatic and political contact, like in the case of the Sultanate of Zanzibar.

One of the main reasons for the long life span of the Ottoman Empire in many of these areas was its well developed millet system which provided an opportunity for the various ethnic, religious and linguistic groups to exercise a certain amount of autonomy¹. Like its predecessor Roman Empire, it was multi-ethnic in all its senses. The Ottoman Empire was also perceived as a Muslim Caliphate with its capital in Istanbul. Although there were significant Christian populations under its wings, especially in the Balkans, the core of the Empire remained Islamic and Islamic ethnic groups were naturally co-opted in its administration as the local representatives of the Sultan along with the bureaucrats sent from Istanbul. Many of these diverse peoples did see themselves as part of the Islamic Caliphate, well into the early twentieth century when European powers began to meddle directly into Ottoman affairs by instigating the various non-Turkish groups to rise against their rulers. The European powers had their own hidden agendas, namely the dismembering of the Empire and then sharing he spoils. Surprisingly, this was totally oblivious to the various non-Turkish groups who were

¹ For an excellent introduction to the history of the Ottoman Empire, see Inalcik, Halil and Quataert, Donald: *An economic and social history of the Ottoman Empire*: Cambridge University Press. 1994.

the subject of this instigation. This led to what came to be dubbed the Arab Awakening led, paradoxically by T. E. Lawrence, the famous Lawrence of Arabia. By the 1920s virtually all the objectives of the European powers, which were acting in concert, had been achieved, namely the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire and the realignment of its pieces to meet European imperial designs.

But for all its shortcomings, the Ottoman Empire had succeeded creating and sustaining large swathes of multicultural communities, some kind of unity in diversity, where people of different racial, ethnic, religious and linguistic backgrounds worked a *modus operandi* and *modus vivendi* that guaranteed amicable relations between the various communities. It was for this reason that diverse groups that included Muslims, Christians, Jews, and other minorities could live peacefully until the Empire began to be undermined from within and from without. Potential conflict was deflected by ensuring that every community or millet was self-governing as far as matters of faith and custom were concerned. All the groups had the genuine perception that there were minimum instances of interference in the internal affairs of the various communities. This certainly did not mean that there was an absolute absence of conflict among the disparate groups. Conflict is part of the human condition, but it is the mode of conflict resolution that is at the heart of stability and peace.

It is true that as minorities living in Muslim majority, a certain amount of disaffection was bound to be exhibited given that in some instances these minorities were legally disabled by being subjected to taxation in the form of *jizya* that was paid in lieu of military service. Given the Islamic jurisprudential framework within which they worked, the Ottoman bureaucrats absolved the non-Muslims from serving in the armed forces as had been the case historically in historical Muslim empires; they were merely carrying on a tradition that had been institutionalized several centuries before the existence of the Ottoman Empire. This was considered as part of the natural order of things. It never occurred to anyone then that this was a discriminatory practice that could easily invite resentment. But the fact that this multi-racial and multi-religious situation could be maintained for centuries speaks volumes for the relative fairness of the Ottoman system of governance. Some minorities felt especially more protected and safe under the Muslim Ottoman rule than they did under other religious dispensations. This was particularly true of Jews of the Ottoman Empire. Many were descended from Jews expelled from Spain during the period of *Reconquista* when there was mass expulsion of Muslims and Jews in one of the darkest chapters in Spanish history. These refugees found sanctuary in the Ottoman Empire and the freedom of movement ensured that later they were to disperse to all its corners, from Tunis to Istanbul itself. It is interesting to note that Fatih Mehmet conquered Istanbul in 1453 and only a few decades later, in 1492, was the expulsion effected. The millet system ensured that different ethnic and religious groups were insulated from the real danger of losing their identity by the erosion of their cultural and religious characteristics through forced assimilation, which never took place. Where there were any conversions to Islam at all, these were personal and voluntary decisions, whether genuine or expedient, as for example to escape the *jizya*.

Turkish material culture and its diffusion:

This confluence of different ethnicities and religions and cultures created, over the years, a distinct Ottoman culture. This is always meant to mean high Ottoman culture with its distinctive features reflected in its culinary culture, music, architecture, dress but these cultural indicators percolated down to create popular culture too, through the process of diffusion. Remnants of cultural relics can still be seen in some post-Ottoman cultures as part

of current folk cultures of many societies. Just to give an example, what are considered national costumes are often indigenized forms of sartorial borrowings from other cultures, without the wearers necessarily knowing the origins of their national costumes. The tarbush is a case in point. This head item is quite well- spread in a lot of cultures and is clearly an Ottoman cultural item. It was used and continues to be used in different countries and regions. It a significant symbol of the ulama of Egypt, its wearer marking him as an Azharite, an alumnus of that bastion of classical Islamic learning, as much as a marker of Moroccan indigenous culture, and is worn by both king and plebian on appropriate occasions. It is just one of those Ottoman relics that refuse to go away. One commentator has remarked that:

“It is a relic of a bygone age, a cultural icon with a colorful political past. Once favored by pashas and policemen, this brimless hat with the black silk tassel commanded respect for its wearer. From Morocco to Turkey, Syria to Egypt, it signified style.”

The tarboush got as far south as East Africa. This author remembers it as part of the school uniform in colonial Kenya in the late 1950s and early 60s. It only disappeared with the disappearance of the colonial state after Kenya gained independence.

There were other items of material culture, like carpets, that fund their way to the homes of the rich. But there are also borrowings, some unexpected, from the area of language that suggest some contact. One interesting example is the Swahili word *karakosi* popular in politics, for a stooge, deriving from the initial meaning for a puppet, which suggests manipulability, from the Turkish *kara goz*, literally meaning ‘black eye’, but which is the name for popular puppet show that derives from the Ottoman period. There are also a lot of words of Arabic and Persian origin that African languages share with Turkish from their common Islamic cultures and of course now many words of English origin because of the global reach of English and its role as the dominant language of popular culture, science and technology.

New relations: educational:

In the past two decades there has been an unprecedented influx of African students into Turkish Universities to study various disciplines in the sciences through the initiative of the Turkish government itself, through inter-governmental exchanges of scholarships, and through arrangements with the Organization of Islamic Conference countries which sponsored Muslim students from Muslim minority countries, in which Turkey provided a quota for these students to study in Turkish Universities. These students have been required to acquire speaking, reading and writing competence in the Turkish language, which is the main medium of instruction in Turkish Universities and to enable them to integrate and function fully within Turkish society. This linguistic competence has also enabled them to get a better insight into Turkish culture and worldview. One interesting phenomenon is the rise in the number of students who come to Turkey already knowing the Turkish language. These are mostly students who have graduated from Turkish international schools in such strategically important African countries as Nigeria, Kenya and Senegal. These schools follow the national curricula of the countries that they are situated in and students sit the for national exams of their respective countries, but who in addition voluntarily follow courses in the Turkish language as part of their extra curricular activities and thus enrich their experience as world citizens. These students seem to experience fewer social adjustment problems when they come to Turkey to begin their studies. Given the differences in the educational set up in their

own countries and in Turkey, students no matter how well adjusted, do encounter initial problems of learning structural differences and the manner in which things are done here, nevertheless experience less stress and trauma than those who have not only to learn a new language but start from scratch to grasp the system. One positive thing that might at least be said is that among African students in Turkish Universities there is a very low rate of dropout and the overwhelming majority do graduate. A small percentage of these even get into the graduate programs in medicine and engineering. One only hopes that the scholarships offered by the Turkish government do not stop only at the science and technology courses. There is a particular need to encourage students to take up scholarships that sponsor them to study subjects in the humanities and social sciences, in subjects like Turkish language and literature, Turkish history and politics, so that those who graduate in these disciplines and pursue doctoral studies in these areas will be able to go back and introduce these disciplines in African institutions of higher learning.

A number of those students who have graduated from Turkish have married into Turkish families and have either taken their spouses back to Africa or chosen to stay behind and acquire Turkish citizenship. Many of those who have chosen to go back have gone to important positions in their professions and are contributing substantially to national development in their countries through the skills they acquired during their training in Turkish institutions of higher learning. Unemployment is virtually unknown among African graduates of Turkish institutions of higher learning.

Academic and cultural exchanges:

These ties can be strengthened even further by expanding bilateral contacts through academic exchanges of students and staff on long term or short term basis, and by periodic visits of sportsmen, musicians, and artists; by exchanging T.V. programs, and especially documentaries that inform each side about the histories and cultures of the other.

There is a necessity to introduce the study of the major African languages like Kiswahili, Hausa and Zulu in Turkish Universities and the reciprocal teaching of Turkish and its dialects spoken in Central Asia in African Universities. Many Africans are unaware that Turkish is the main lingua franca of much of Central Asia and is spoken by well over two hundred million people in such strategically important countries as Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, parts of Tajikistan and even far as Afghanistan and China. For both Africans and Turks, the mutual learning of these languages will greatly facilitate mobility and trade possibilities. Turkish businessmen are already a presence in some key African countries but Africans have not yet seriously explored the trade potential with Turkey apart from a few enterprising businessmen and women who consider Turkey a byword for quality and relatively cheap textiles.

Apart from academic exchange of staff, universities could play an important cultural role by hoisting writers from each other's countries and by initiating courses in Turkish language, history, politics and literature. African literature is an important component of World literature and works by African authors could be translated into Turkish in order to familiarize Turkish readers with this literary heritage. Works of major Turkish authors should also be translated into the major African languages for an African readership. These activities would narrow the information gap about the two societies. As it is Turks know very little about Africa, and the little they know is mediated through Western media that often portrays Africa in its desperate moments of famine, hunger and natural catastrophes. On the Turkish side

there have been recent attempts to focus somewhat on Africa in such programs as “AYNA” (Turkish word for mirror) broadcast by *Samanyolu* T.V. station and sometimes shown on Channel 5, but the program merely reinforces the stereotype of the continent and its peoples because of the poor preparedness of the presenter who himself seems to have done very little background reading on the countries that he visits. Such programs could have enormously improved understanding between the two peoples by talking to African intellectuals, artists, writers, educationists and movers and shakers. Instead the programs fleet through markets and deserts without exploring real issues that affect the lives of the people. This situation could be improved through exchange of programs made on various aspects of Africa by African documentary makers through the Nairobi based Union of Radio and Television Networks of Africa (URTNA). Turkish Radio and Television TRT, in its turn could give African television stations those programs it things will advance a better understanding of Turkish history, society and culture.

As we allude to earlier, there is a need to introduce the study of languages in both Turkey and Africa. Some Universities, even as regional centers, would be encouraged to offer courses in Turkish language, and on their part, Turkish Universities could also embark on a program of introducing the major African lingua franca like Kiswahili and Hausa. All these three languages are important in enhancing corporation, not only as languages of wider communication in their respective regions but also carriers of their cultural heritage. Africans are unaware that Turkish is spoken over large swathes of Central Asia, with speakers numbering 141 million strong. Equally, Turks are unaware that there are well over 100 million speakers of Kiswahili, spread over East and Central Africa, and well over 200 million speakers of Hausa spread all over West Africa. Most people in Africa are unaware that Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan constitute a homogeneous linguistic and cultural continuum. Except for Kyrgyzstan, virtually all these other Central Asian countries have emerged as repositories of that precious global resource, oil, and natural gas, and precisely for this reason have recently become collectively a strategically important geo-political area.² As part of the Soviet Communist empire, these states were subsumed under its sovereignty and were virtually cut off from the outside world and their individual identities only came to be known more properly after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

At the educational level too, Turkish and African Universities could sign memoranda of understanding that would facilitate student and staff exchanges and in which students audit courses in African and Turkish Universities in areas where they will mutually benefit. It would benefit science- major students in biology, botany and zoology from Turkey to sample the rich African bio-diversity and ecology by spending time studying the ecology of African countries. These trips could also be undertaken as part of summer holidays in which students both learn and relax in tropical and Savannah environments. To date, it seems it is only the privately sponsored students from Turkey who have seized the opportunity to study in African Universities, a fact that is little known. Recently there has been a spate of students from Turkey who have sought admission in African Universities, and especially in the Anglophone countries of Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa and Tanzania. An occasional student has gone to Dakar. This is a welcome development and this core of returnees from African Universities should provide the important social and cultural link between Turkey and Africa because many of these graduates already speak the more widespread African languages like Kiswahili and Hausa. These graduates should be encouraged to join diplomatic service and serve in

² See Pope, Hugh: *Sons of the Conquerors: The Rise of the Turkic World*. Overlook Duckworth. New York. 2005.

African diplomatic postings. They should be encouraged to form Alumni Associations, as much as those African students who have returned home, to strengthen Turkish-African ties. They could use these associations not only to network but also to act as bridges between their societies. These groupings already exist for students who studied in the United States, India and Germany and are active in organizing annual events to bring together past students and forge new links within the larger societies in which they live.

Promotion of sports:

The African continent is famous for its world class athletes. Long distance runners from Kenya and Morocco compete in competitive races both at home and abroad and have brought honor and glory not only to their countries but also to the entire continent. But what is edifying is that some of these athletes have been community conscious and have set up world class facilities to train the next generation of athletes to take their place as world beaters. These facilities are so good that even athletes from Europe have made use of these facilities to hone their skills in high altitude settings which they cannot find in their own countries. Turkish athletes, both men and women should explore the possibility of making use of these facilities to improve their performance and learn from the experience of some of the greatest living athletes like Kipchoge Arap Keino, Mike Boit and Michael Arap Sang, to mention only a few of these.

African football enjoys significant respect world wide through the dazzling performance of national teams like those Nigeria, Cameroon, Morocco, Egypt and South Africa. Turkish audiences have hardly had the chance of seeing some of Africa's most talented players live in action. African and Turkish Sports Ministries must take the initiative to arrange their respective teams to place friendly games in both Africa and Turkey.

Culture, again:

Turkey has a well developed cinematic culture with films that address the concerns of ordinary citizens and the paradoxes and challenges of life. Many of the themes of Turkish cinema will find ready reception in many African countries because of the similarities of family structures and the central place of the family in African culture. They are also cheaper to import than those from Hollywood. Arrangements could also be made for African and Turkish movie makers and directors to meet and discuss and learn from one another. The cultural division of African Union and the Ministry of Culture in Turkey could take the initiative to get these two groups together.

Turkey too has one of the most vibrant musical cultures anywhere and it would certainly further the cause of mutual understanding and appreciation if occasionally Turkish musicians could be persuaded to perform to African audiences in various African capitals like Cape Town, Nairobi, Accra, Tunis, Fez, Cairo and Nairobi. And again, under the auspices of the cultural section of African Union, world renowned African musicians could be enlisted to perform in Turkish centers of culture like Istanbul and Ankara and thus display something of African musical genius. Or there could be joint performances by African dance troupes and such professional groups as *Sultans of Dance*, one of the most spectacular dance groups anywhere. Also the more famous of Turkish musicians and artists could be sponsored to perform in African capital cities especially in East Africa and North and North East Africa which have strong Middle Eastern musical influences and where the Turkish kind of music can easily be appreciated. It must not be forgotten that popular culture has a direct bearing on

economic activities. Notice that the popularity of American popular culture globally also does fuel demand for American goods.

There is no reason too why African scientists and Turkish scientists should not come together in collaborative and joint scientific projects to improve agricultural yield or animal husbandry. Already American, European and Japanese scientists have been collaborating with African scientists in many vital areas of research in medicine, genetics and agriculture, among several areas of research.

Mutual learning of languages:

Africa could also borrow a leaf from Turkey's experience in modernizing the Turkish language. It is increasingly realized now that no meaningful development can take place when a significant part of any nation's population is denied access to knowledge or skills because these are transmitted through a foreign language that cannot be realistically made accessible to all the citizens of that state, and that the only wise thing to do is the modernization of the main or national language of the country that is widely spoken and understood within the nation. Part of the Mustafa Kemal Ataturk's modernization project was to make education as widely accessible as possible and this could only have been done through the modernization of the Turkish language. This he successfully did through the mobilization of linguistic expertise through the setting up of the *Turk Dil Kurumu* (Turkish Language Institute) in the 1930s to oversee the standardization and modernization of Turkish language and lexicon. Many African countries are already brooding over the issue of language and its relationship to development. According to both UNESCO and experiences of researchers in the areas of psychology of language, concepts are readily internalized by children when these are transmitted through the medium of the mother tongue, and the experiences of places like Japan and Korea have taught the non-Western societies that for economic and technological development to be realized, it is not necessary to do so only via a European language, that local languages are as good instruments as the former colonial languages as long as there is the will to invest in their modernization and development, without necessarily totally abandoning those languages where prudence dictates their retention as languages of international exchange. Further, the almost half century of research in the modern discipline linguistics ushered in by Noam Chomsky's seminal work in *Generative Linguistics* in 1957, has confirmed the truism that there are no inherently superior or inferior languages, only the will to invest resources in their development ultimately determines their destiny as important tools of intellectual introspection. The apparent diversity of human languages in fact obscures common and universal characteristics that are shared by all of the world's six thousand or so languages, characteristics that ultimately enable us to learn other foreign languages and to translate between languages, which would otherwise have been impossible, were it not for these language universals. Chomsky's work also laid to rest the myth about the difficulty of some languages relative to others; that there are no difficult or simpler languages learn and that there are specific factors like age, natural flair for languages, the cultural context for language learning, that determine how well or fast languages are learned, rather than the putative difficulty of some languages relative to others. Educationists interested in the promotion of indigenous languages as media of instruction n school systems could well learn from one of the success stories in this regard by visiting Turkey and exchanging notes with language planners in the country. Turkey has one of the strongest cultural identities in the world, whose bedrock has been the Turkish language. Dr. Andrew Mango, an Istanbul born

British intellectual and a biographer of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk has captured this strong sense of being a Turk when he observed that:

“It is often claimed that Turks are experiencing a crisis of identity, torn between East and West. In fact there are few peoples which have a stronger sense of national identity than the Turks. Their problem is to be accepted for what they are, a distinct people with a Muslim background; a pushy people who, far from being part of the lethargic East, often find the West too relaxed in its comforts. Turkey is not only an aspirant to the European Union, it is a challenge to it.”³

In conclusion, I would like to point out that there are already areas of mutual interest between Turkey and Africa and there are already points of contact between these cultural areas through academia and trade. This could be the matrix through which future exchanges could be based for mutual benefits between our two areas. There can never be mutual exchanges without first laying the groundwork of mutual understanding. Unfortunately non-Western countries, under the excuse of lack of resources, do not initiate institutions and programs for the study of the non-Western world. In contrast, all the major Western nations have respectable programs for the study of all the major non-Western areas. These initiatives sometimes go back several centuries, whereas others are projects that were embarked upon as soon as the Second World War was concluded, where the leading Western countries like the United Kingdom of Great Britain felt that the end of the war ushered in a new era of international relations because of the rapid rate of decolonization in the wake of the conclusion of the Second World War. This required new diplomatic initiatives that differed markedly from the hitherto unequal colonial relationships. The establishment of the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, was a direct result of these changed relationships between the colonial periphery and the metropolitan center. SOAS reoriented its focus from a center for the training of colonial functionaries to a center of excellence for the study of African and Asia political, economic and cultural institutions. Scandinavian countries like Sweden and Norway too have serious programs in African studies. On its part, the United States of America has vibrant African Studies Programs in leading American Universities, and especially at the University of California, Los Angeles, Northwestern University, University of Florida and University of Wisconsin, at Madison. Because of their much developed facilities thousands of African students have passed through their portals to study aspects of their own continents and at the same time provided America its own expertise in its constructive engagement with the African continent.

The rise of Turkish Africanists:

It is interesting to note that Turkey in fact is not bereft of scholars interested in Africa. There is already a core group, albeit small, of Turkish scholars who have done research on aspects of African society. These scholars have solid understanding of current African issues and should be persuaded into forming an African Studies Association of Turkey that can come together on an annual basis to discuss their research, just as the African Studies Association of America does, or the newly formed Association of European Africanists which had its first and successful congress at SOAS this year between 29th June and 5th July, 2005. Africanists resident in Turkey could participate in the proceedings of the latter association, and will find that they are part of an exciting and large group of social scientists interested in Africa. They could invite some of their colleagues to come and give lectures on African issues, ranging from

³ Mango, Andrew: *The Turks Today*. John Murray (Publishers). 2004.Pg. 4.

art, to music and politics, and this will certainly fire enthusiasm about Africa. The Istanbul based NGO, *Sanat ve Bilim Vakfı*, headed by the distinguished Turkish professor of International relations, Prof. Dr. Ahmet Davutoglu, already has organized lectures to interested students on aspects of African history. All these individual efforts will ultimately bear fruit in encouraging an understanding of Africa.

On their part, African countries should not be merely trapped in opening only to the West, but must encourage their academics to take an interest in non-Western and non-African societies.