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Immutability, Stability and Longevity: Contribution of İstanbul’s Cultural Landscape to World Cultures

Nilgün Anadolu-Okur

Bu şehir-i Stanbul ki bu misl-ü bahadır
Bir sengine yekpare Acem mülkü fedadır.
—Şair Nedim

This paper examines from a culturalist viewpoint İstanbul’s contribution to the diversification of cultures and ethnic identities of the Republic of Turkey. The city’s wealth lies in its reservoir of cultures, multiplicity of civilizations, languages and religions which are lively, highly operational and versatile. İstanbul, the city of cultures, has been traditionally recognized with its embodiment of continuous amalgamation and ethnic toleration. At Ortaköy and Boyacıköy, an Armenian Catholic church, a Gregorian church, two Greek churches, two synagogues and two mosques stand side by side, in close proximity to each other. In Üsküdar’s Kuzguncuk (previously Kozinitza) an Armenian church rises near a synagogue. Right across the street a Greek Orthodox church stands next to a mosque. Not far from these structures there is an old Jewish cemetery. Besides Balat on the European side, Kuzguncuk was once recognized as a long-established Jewish town on İstanbul’s Anatolian side. Such neighborhoods in İstanbul are reminders of a collective epic memory generating a deeply-rooted historical experience in the life of a city which has traditionally served to a diverse population. Almost every district in İstanbul suggests a harmonious co-existence among peoples of different ethnic origins and religions who can communicate with each other in Turkish. Thus it is proper to state that İstanbul sits at the crossroads of cultures, namely the East and the West, and the city itself does not mind which side she actually belongs to.
Introduction

As Nedim (the 17th century Ottoman poet) remarked in one of his lyrical poems, if he were ever to be separated from İstanbul, he would be willing to trade the entire land of “Acem”—Persia—in order to catch a glimpse of his beloved city. In a paper which attempts to reveal contours of genuine relationships established between men, women and locations, surely there is much room for illumination.

The temples, shrines, tombs, mosques and churches can be identified as “spatial citizens” of İstanbul whether they are Turkish, Byzantine, Greek, Roman, Christian, Jewish or Armenian. The city blends and infuses magic to such relationships and affectionately wraps its arms around these structures in an amazing coat of seamless harmony. The multi-colored cosmopolitanism which emanates from each and every corner of the city testifies to its unique gift of adaptability without coercion. Turks who traditionally believed in “alliances” have chosen the term “İstanbullu” as the generic name to define the people, and even the monuments that are native to İstanbul. Actually the term describes the multi-dimensional, multi-ethnic and equally diverse characteristics of the city as well as of its inhabitants. İstanbul has developed a culture of its own which has generated an amalgamation of the old with the new, the traditional with the avant-garde throughout the past centuries.

Figure 1. Boyacıköy, Mahmud II Fountain, (Renovated in 1995). Photo by Nilgün Anadolu-Ökur,
Figure 2. Boyacıköy, Panagia Evangelistra Greek Orthodox Church. Photo by Nilgün Anadolu-Okur, January 2010

Figure 3. Boyacıköy, Surp Yerits Mangants Armenian Church. Photo by Nilgün Anadolu-Okur, January 2010
The principal issues in any inquiry about culture should include cosmological, epistemological, axiological and aesthetic dimensions.\textsuperscript{1} One's relationship to the world, and to the cosmos, to life, death, and fate—on a metaphysical and non-metaphysical plane—determine the cosmological issues. The sources of knowledge and value of truth in a society is determined by epistemological concepts. Value and one's worth in a society is determined by axiological concepts that govern the ethics of the group and its cultural norms. "Good" as opposed to "bad," "beautiful" as opposed to "non-beautiful" as virtual adjectives determine how an individual in a community, or how a cultural group in a society, or how a nation in the world is assessed and perceived by those outside the community, the society and the nation. How one religion and its followers are perceived and evaluated by those outside that religion poses a significantly bizarre but equally imperative problem too. Aesthetic dimensions in a cultural inquiry represent values upon which a society operates and produces. The material evidence of aesthetic principles esteemed valuable within a culture is often represented in works of art, both secular and sacred.

In Istanbul the elements of culture or the acculturation process have synergistically established a peculiar bond or an alliance not only with the lives but with the destinies of its inhabitants. As the demographics are increasingly diversified, the city becomes progressively more tolerant to absorb change. On the
other hand İstanbul's cultural fabric was made up of infinite and indefinable sets of contrasting phenomena which are characteristically superimposed upon each other by centuries-old memory layers. There are no individual sets of divisions but a collective plethora of images stored in multiple layers in which each group is easily distinguished through its own individual cosmological, epistemological, axiological and aesthetic characteristics within the whole. Alliance through acculturation is a theoretical projection which delineates the past, present and future prospects of global cities such as İstanbul.

Figure 5. Visitors at Eyüp Sultan Mosque and Tomb, the courtyard. Photo by Zekai Erdal
In order to illustrate the association of the city's physical and aesthetic elements with the lives of its multi-national inhabitants a few examples are chosen. These examples epitomize, alongside similar structures in the city, the traditionally diverse characteristics of Istanbul. People from all religions and nations can easily identify with the "Istanbullu" elements of these structures simply because they do not belong to a specific nation, a particular culture or a single religion. Their widespread "consumption" by masses over centuries indicates that they have been common products of a multi-ethnic, multicultural conglomeration of human cultures. Ultimately their immutability serves to a three-prong objective: it delivers stability and longevity to the original culture(s) which created them; it contributes to the advancement of interdisciplinary studies; it serves as a humanizing factor during international disputes in the age of globalism.

Is it possible then, to define the parameters of Istanbul's cultural landscape? If such a definition is workable, can scholars discuss the possibility of setting it within a systematic framework? Turkish society's national sensitivity and compassion for preservation of one's inherited legacy is a well-recognized fact throughout the world. Yet this quality has been taken for granted by Turks and foreigners alike. During their transformation from a non-Muslim to a Muslim identity, elements of Istanbul's multi-cultural landscape have been somewhat altered, yet they have managed to survive several plans and plots. Actually the monuments which have
successfully endured the acculturation process—without losing their original intrinsic value and their initial purpose—convey much insight about their past grandeur to contemporary researchers and visitors. This is one of the reasons why the city has been declared a “Mecca” for visitors, including authors, poets, refugees, converts, asylum seekers, statesmen, politicians and artists.

Pierre Loti, the French author, resided in Eyüp and gazed at the splendor of the Golden Horn as he bewailed in Aziyade about his unreciprocated love for a Muslim woman. The British poet Byron swam the Dardanelles (1810-1811) and met Sultan Mahmut II at Topkapı Palace, before he went on to fight on the Greek side Against Turks. When the last Kaiser of Germany arrived in Istanbul in 1898 he was surprised to learn that the stunning Şale Pavilion at Yıldız Palace and the elegant fountain at the Hippodrome were constructed simply to honor him. Agatha Christie owed much of her fame and literary success with Murder on the Orient Express to a trip she took on the famous train which brought her to Istanbul’s Pera Palas Hotel in the 1920s. Ernest Hemingway, then a war correspondent, was sent to Istanbul from Paris in 1922 by his newspaper to observe the war between Greece and Turkey. Lastly the famous African American author James Baldwin resided in Istanbul (initially in 1961-1962 and later during the 1970s), basically to flee the stifling atmosphere of race relations and color discrimination in the U.S. While he completed Another Country in Istanbul (1962) he was known to have established lasting friendships with prominent “İstanbullıs” who then dominated the theater circles, including Gültriz Sururi and Engin Cezzar.

İstanbul’s genuine wealth lies in its reservoir of cultures, diversity of civilizations, languages and religions which are still lively despite the passage of time and phases of transformations they have gone through. For instance The Hagia Sophia,—the majestic royal basilica built on top of two previous churches—was originally inaugurated by Emperor Justinian in AD 537 following a restoration. However the once powerful leader of the Eastern Roman Empire could not possibly comprehend that “The Church of Holy Wisdom” would be converted into a mosque a century later. Today the 1,400 year old building complex stands as a glorious testament to the alliances of cultures mainly due to the wisdom and sophisticated diplomacy of the Ottoman Sultan Mehmet II (Fatih Sultan Mehmet) who decided to preserve the structure as a universally acclaimed place of worship for future generations.

The Hagia Sophia sits right across the Blue Mosque of Sultan Ahmet I, who commissioned Mehmet Ağa for the construction of a magnificent structure which would exceed the established grandeur of the basilica across the street. Since the day it rose in front of her eyes “Sophia” gazes at the mosque’s plenteously cascading domes and piercingly spearing minarets—a total of six—with envy and a great deal of admiration. The leafy Sultan Ahmet Square rests between the two
structures as a symbolic testament to the secret peace treaty the two structures signed in 1609 when the mosque was first commissioned.

Ultimately the story of the Hagia Sophia and the Sultan Ahmet Mosque sets a unique case about the anticipation of building a seamless cosmos for humanity in İstanbul for many centuries. This study addresses issues of religious freedom granted to minorities (Christian, Armenian, Jewish, Greek-Orthodox and Roman Catholic) and commemorates their sacred places which were preserved either as mosques, synagogues, churches and museums (for instance The Chora/Kariye) in İstanbul. The neighborhoods whose multi-ethnic characteristics are distinctly visible in Galata, Balat and Fener are also among the topics that are explored.

When Byzas first envisioned his city a divine intervention might have fashioned İstanbul's immutable character which led to its longevity. Alliances and friendships formed in İstanbul reveal an infinite kaleidoscope of sketches which remain true to their original luster and lure public appeal despite past centuries. İstanbul unmistakably maintains the characteristics of an international treasure which belongs to the collective intellectual heritage of all humankind. The epic journey each entity imparted can be attributed to more than one principle of cultural transformation. Whether it is spiritual, cosmological, axiological, epistemological or aesthetic their constituency remains unchanged: they belong to İstanbul and they too are proud to be part of the "İstanbullu." Social issues which capture the spirit of the İstanbullu are often brought up in the novels of Turkish author Orhan Pamuk.²

Immutability and Longevity

"Great Byzantium... where nothing changes" wrote Yeats.³ In fact, the Empire was characterized by immutability and longevity. No matter how much it changed, "it presented a glitter of studied immutability, which was essentially part of its mystique. It was the emperor's duty to preserve the ancient customs of the state... the past validated the present."⁴ Instead of innovation, which was considered dangerous and subversive, restoration, renewal, rejuvenation was favored.

Additionally, Byzantium emulated a superior longevity. "Byzantium was the only organized state to the west of China which had survived without interruption from antiquity until the dawn of the modern age."⁵ From the 10th century onwards the city had gradually become a cosmopolitan center primarily due to the establishment of trading colonies which arrived from Italy. The numbers of foreign merchants and tradesmen—namely Venetians, Amalfitans, Pisans, and Genoese—were in the thousands during the Komnenian period. They lived in small towns set up along the Golden Horn with the exception of the Genoese who had built themselves a substantially wealthy colony in an independently
governed town, called Galata (or Pera, Beyoğlu) in 1303. The town which survived the Turkish conquest retained its massive walls even until 1864.

By the 11th and 12th centuries Byzantium had become a city inundated with immigrants. With a booming economy, its wealth was steadily increasing. The ethnic minorities were willing to pay their taxes, serve in the army and respect the emperor. About the demographic composition and geographical distribution of its ethnic population it is difficult to be specific. However in addition to the “natives” born in the city, there were Slavic people from the Balkans, Armenians, Georgians and Laz from the Caucasians, in addition to Syrians, Turks and Christian Arabs, as well as “smaller groups of Jews, Gypsies, nomadic Vlachs, and western traders and adventurers.” Although Slavs constituted the majority, “they made the least impact on the composition of the elite.” It was primarily the Caucasians who provided emperors and empresses, ministers, military commanders and landlords to the Empire. Despite the variety of religions and cultures that populated the city, the exemplary cohesiveness of the elements that contributed to its uniformity did not change much even in the post-conquest days. Later, in the decades which followed the Turkish conquest immutable characteristics of Byzantine art and aesthetics were continued in the Ottoman context by preservation and maintenance efforts. Given the Moslem context, such a transition was not expected to succeed, however Ottomans opted to preserve majority of the monuments and structures in Byzantium establishing a “continuance” between the two. Fatih Sultan Mehmet as a visionary leader had been the most influential force behind such a revolutionary idea which would eventually lead to a cultural transformation in the city. The following section provides an overview of such examples in explanation of immutability and longevity.

The Church of Holy Wisdom, the Blue Mosque and the Hippodrome

Built in the middle of the city’s historic quarter the two structures have been neighbors and close friends. However the large grounds that binds them—the Hippodrome of the Byzantium—do not bear any resemblance in its legacy to the serene, tranquil past of the structures nearby. Its providence was shaped with conspiracy; its destiny was scorched with blood since the day it was laid out.

Haghia Sophia, the “Church of Holy Wisdom” was initially designed “as an earthly mirror of the heavens.” With its majestic silhouette it sits right across the Blue Mosque of Sultan Ahmet I, who was an astute ruler of the 17th century Ottoman dynasty. In 1609 Sultan Ahmet I commissioned Mehmet Ağa, the imperial architect, a stately mosque to be built across the Hagia Sophia. With its six minarets—almost a sacrilegious attempt to rival the architecture of Mecca—
and the blue İznik tiles which adorned its interiors the mosque was apparently a rising star—young, pretty, vibrant and motivating—ready to compete with the past splendor of an aging Haghia Sophia.

No expense was spared in the interior decoration of the mosque. Inspired by intricate designs used in Chinese porcelains (initially imported to Turkey around the 14th century), İznik tiles duplicated the same technique only in different design and colors. Recurring patterns of carnations, peacocks, feathers and long-stemmed tulips adorned their glossy surfaces in blue, green, turquoise, white and red. Since the day it rose majestically in front of her aging eyes the elder Sophia kept looking at her young neighbor's cascading domes, semi-domes and spearing minarets with envy.

Of the once legendary Hippodrome merely two obelisks and a broken brass column have survived. Constantine who was known as a visionary leader had planned to decorate his capital and internationalize its image as an imperial city by importing global symbols of power and opulence to Constantinople. As customary in Ancient Egypt and Greece, Constantine and his followers were determined to make the city a cosmopolitan metropolis not only for Christianity but for the rest of the world.

As a matter of fact, for more than 1,000 years the Hippodrome continued to hold the center of force and energy in the city. Almost 100,000 people could be entertained and accommodated here during public events. In A.D. 532, during the reign of Justinian I, the infamous Nika revolt was triggered after a scuffle between the two competing chariot teams. In the aftermath of this violent event the city was burned down by angry mobs. As the revolt was finally suppressed, 30,000 people who had been trapped in the Hippodrome were massacred by the troops of Justinian.

Centuries later the young yeniceriler (janissaries)—who often got restless and protested anything from their wages to political decisions by the Sultans and Grand viziers—would gather for demonstrations at the center of the Hippodrome. Many Sultans and viziers lost their lives during such riots which first started in the Hippodrome and later engulfed the entire city. Yet there were also joyful occasions at the Hippodrome such as guild processions, festivals and circumcision ceremonies held for young princes. At one time the Hippodrome was even called “At Meydani” (Horses' Square) where the horses of the Ottoman generals were kept in the stables nearby. After a while the “Hippodrome” and its initial purpose lost its significance for Turks who were not interested in chariot races. Its grounds came to be known as the “Sultanahmet Square” due to its proximity to the Sultan Ahmet Mosque.
Figure 7. Hagia Sophia viewed from Galata Tower. Photo by Akanmu Adebayo, July 2008

Figure 8. Blue Mosque of Sultan Ahmet I. Photo by Zekai Erdal
Figure 9. Iznik Tiles adorn interior walls of the Blue Mosque (Sultan Ahmet Camii). Photo by Zekai Erdal
Nevertheless during the Turkish War of Independence (1919-1922) Sultanahmet Meydanı (or Square) witnessed passionate gatherings where public speeches were delivered and mass demonstrations were organized to protest the military occupation of İstanbul by European nations. On such an occasion, as the British Navy Admiral gazed at the seven hills of the city he was about to invade, nationalist Turkish author Halide Edip Adivar was addressing the crowd from a makeshift wooden platform at Sultanahmet Square. Her speeches to raise public awareness inspired and motivated the Turks as she summoned her folks to resist foreign aggression with all their might.

Hence, the Hippodrome/Sultanahmet Meydanı is deeply sketched into the epic memory of Turkish people as a sacred ground connecting it to additional cultural landscapes represented by both the Church of Holy Wisdom and the Sultan Ahmet Mosque. As a sacred ground where Turks first took the oath of “Ya İstiklal, Ya Ölüm,” (Give me Liberty, or Give me Death), the Hippodrome square was finally restored to its original grandeur. Since then it has endured the passage of time enduring relentless changes in political climate. Yet once Again stability was to reign supreme in İstanbul.

From Monastery to Dervish Lodge: A Spiritual Journey
Chora – Kariye

“Her bağçesi bir cemenistan-i letafet
Her gusesi bir meclis-i pür feyz-u safadir.”
—Şair Nedim

Built outside the city walls of Byzantium, Chora Monastery took its name from the Greek word “Khora” meaning “country.” The Turkish name “Kariye” is derived from Arabic, meaning “village” or “countryside.” However some sources indicate that the name implicates “womb” which is symbolic of Jesus Christ’s conception in the Virgin Mary’s womb.

According to early records the present church building was built during the 12th century by Isaacios. Later Theodore Metochides, the skillful and virtuous Byzantine official, added a two-story building to the north. A respected orator of his time, Metochides was also able to set up a thriving library in the monastery. He was one of the most important state officials of his time and therefore he was appointed as the General Logothete who was in charge of taxation.

Metochides was known to have instructed a group of young artisans between 1310 and 1320 and taught them the techniques of mosaic installation. The magnificent mosaics were made of cubic pieces of glass which were painted in gold, silver, blue, red, green and black. White marble was cut into cubic pieces
and used to accentuate white color wherever necessary, as dull and matte colors were used to portray landscape scenes and buildings.12

Metochides was truly a “native-son” of İstanbul. In his youth he had studied politics, literature, philosophy, mathematics and astronomy. Some sources reveal that he was the greatest Byzantine writer in the 14th century. In his old age he sought refuge in the Chora monastery by joining the order of monks but spent his remaining life in poverty and ill health. Upon his death in 1329 he was buried in Chora.

Following Fatih Sultan Mehmet’s siege in 1453 Chora was converted into a mosque and remained one for over 400 years. It was named “Kariye Camii” after a minaret was added. However its overall plan was never altered. Although the main hall was opened to Muslim prayer the general plan of the building was not compromised, nor were the mosaics or frescoes demolished.

During the transformation from church to mosque wooden partitions were installed on the walls of the nave. These wooden panels not only revered the Muslim tradition which prohibited any use of imagery and illustrations but served as practical implements which could easily be removed to appease the eyes of foreign guests and visitors. In contrast to the Christian crusaders who invaded the city and ransacked Byzantine treasures in the 1200s, Ottoman concern and respect for preservation maintained the intrinsic value of Chora and cherished its fundamental elements.

Significantly, several reports by foreign visitors who came to the city between 1795 and 1910 reveal that the mosaics of the nave were actually covered with wooden panels, whereas the ones on the narthexes were left open to public view. A heavier emphasis was placed in preserving the church building itself rather than the adjacent monastery section. In the 18th century the Chief Eunuch Hacı Beşir Ağa ordered a school and a soup kitchen for the poor to be started in Kariye Mosque. In early 20th century the school and the soup kitchen was used as a “Dervish Lodge” hosting a variety of guests from mystics to scholars of Sufism. Meanwhile Kariye had become a popular final resting place among Muslim dignitaries. A companion to the Muslim prophet, Ebu Said El Hudri’s tomb is located to the left of the entrance, ironically not far from where Metochides was laid to rest. The fountain which was added in 1669 enhanced the multi-ethnic characteristics of Chora imitating the architectural elements of a typical mosque complex. To illustrate continuance of immutability from Byzantium to Ottoman in İstanbul, Chora/Kariye provides a good example.

Chora went through a series of restorations in 1875 during the reign of Ottoman Sultan Abdülaziz, and later in 1899 during the era of Abdülhamit II on the occasion of German Kaiser Wilhelm II’s memorable visit to İstanbul. However the most comprehensive effort in restoring the original beauty and
grandeur of the Chora/Kariye complex was provided by the late Çelik Gülersoy primarily between 1974 and 1986. Eliminating the urban blight in its vicinity, restoring dilapidated houses, setting up flower gardens and patios encircling the structure Gülersoy was able to achieve more than what any other individual or public organization did for Chora since Metochides. Open throughout the year as a modern museum complex Chora/Kariye is heir to the “immutable” spirit of Byzantine-Ottoman cultural agglomeration in İstanbul. It owes its longevity to his native sons’ exceptional vision inspired by preservationist caring.

Balat and Fener: İstanbul’s Immutably International Towns

In a 1992 article titled “The Indefinable Culture of İstanbul,” Doğan Kuban asserted that Istanbul is a “vast agglomeration housing a multiplicity of cultures with no central control. Despite the development of an environment which enforces conformity with Western norms [it] does not imply that society is Western, or will ever become so.” In contrast to what Kuban claims, in Balat and Fener Eastern and Western cultures have mutually influenced each other forming new socio-cultural alliances which have altered an ordinary physical environment through ethnic diversity. Such cultural characteristics and boundaries are not easily definable. At the same time through long-term and reciprocal interaction complementary cultural phenomena have generated a strikingly untainted and imperiously immutable cultural climate.

Balat

“Balat,” the Turkish name of the town, was derived from “Palation” in Greek, which meant “palace.” Prior to 1453 it was called “Basiliki Pili,” meaning “Bab-ı Hümayun,” or “Hünkar Kapısı” (Sultan’s Gate). It was one of the most important gates built in and around the massive city walls which surrounded the Golden Horn. The emperors who reached Blacherna Palace from the sea entered the city through this gate. An important entry point, the gate was marked as early as in 1574 in maps of Piri Reis, as well as by Venetian map makers. Historian Kritovulos, in The Conquest of İstanbul, remarked that after sinking the few ships that were left from the Greek fleet, the Ottoman Admiral Hamza Bey ordered his captains to lay anchor near the “Hünkar Kapısı.” The gate was locked, yet he broke the chain and the lock, entering the city with great fanfare. Later the gate was heavily damaged during the earthquake of 1894.

Since the beginning, the multinational identity of their residents rendered Balat and Fener an international characteristic. Balat had been home to Greek-speaking Jews from the Byzantine era onwards. Later Sephardic Jews who
fled Spanish inquisition joined them in the 15th century. Fener, its next door neighbor, became a Greek enclave in the 16th century. Both towns offered an ideal environment for diverse cultures to mingle and thrive collectively. European immigrants who came to Istanbul searching for their distant relatives most likely settled in Balat and they too were quickly integrated.

Ironically the wealthy residents of Balat and Fener were often employed by the Ottomans. Their jobs required them to visit Bab-iali (the government offices) at least once or twice a month in order to conduct business and trade. In this respect they led a comfortably isolated social life in close proximity to the banks of the Golden Horn. The Muslim state which they belonged to followed a “non-interference” policy with minority affairs, which pleased those living in Balat and Fener. At the same time the Jews paid keen attention not to be caught in politics of the Ottoman state which might jeopardize their well-being or endanger their trustworthiness in the eyes of the government. In recognition of the dire circumstances related to their expulsion from Spain in 1492 by the Catholic King of Spain, Jewish population in the city was particularly quite appreciative of the Ottoman Sultan Beyazid II who had unconditionally welcomed Jews to settle in his country. Therefore Jews, more than any other group in Balat and Fener, were traditionally determined to maintain amiable relations with the state. Commonly known as “Reaya” (citizens) Jews, Greeks and Armenians were willing to pay taxes ranging from five to seven and nine kuruş depending on their wealth, nature of their businesses and professions.

Jews of Balat found happiness in self-sufficiency. As they formed a dynamic society within the general parameters of the Ottoman society, they built their own institutions. Their keen observance of Jewish traditions played a great role in maintaining a close-knit society similar to that of Turks.

According to an imperial decree dated 1694 Jews were allowed to build new places of worship in addition to the three synagogues which existed since the Byzantium era. Jak Deleon in his book titled Balat ve Çevresi mentions several synagogues which were built during the Ottoman era in addition to Pul Yasan, Gerus, Sigri, Yanbol, Veria, Ahrida, Cana, Kasturya, Ihtipol. Yanbol synagogue in Balat is famed for its exquisite hand-paintings on its wooden ceiling depicting colorful scenes of pastoral beauty from a town called “Yanboli” in Bulgaria. The first-generation migrants from Yanbol had established the synagogue either in the 1870s or 1890s. Gerus synagogue, once known as “Gerus Sefarad,” (“Expulsion from Spain”) was destroyed in the fire of 1890.

One of the largest surviving synagogues in Istanbul is Ahrida which was built in 1440 by a group of Jews who had migrated from Ohrid in Macedonia. With a capacity for 500 worshippers, it was restored in 1893, and even used as a military camp by a Turkish regiment during the World War II. The central Holy Ark of
Ahrida is known to safeguard rare scrolls from ancient times under the thick layers of hand woven tapestries. This was also the place where Shabbetai Zevi (Sebatay Sevi, 1629-1676) began preaching during a religious fervor which swept the entire city in the 17th century. Banished from the city due to the controversy he sparked, Zevi was later rumored to have converted into Islam although most Jews held that his conversion was subterfuge. His followers are known as the “Sabbatians.”

In Balat where Jewish livelihood thrived, several mosques were built alongside the synagogues and neighboring Greek orthodox churches of Fener. Muslims attended their own businesses as did the rest of the ethnic population which surrounded them. However there were many occasions for socializing when the mahalleli (of the neighborhood) women and children attended the neighborhood hamam (Turkish bath)—at least once a week—where plans were made for weddings in spring and summer. There was a time for funerals and religious prayers where no one questioned or interfered with each other’s affairs. During the long history of Istanbul religious strife among the mahalleli was almost unheard of. Disputes were isolated in origin and quickly resolved; even larger political issues caused minor tension in the ordinary life of the “mahalle” which operated as a cohesive unit. In this neighborhood, as in other ethnic towns of Istanbul, mutual sustainability was valued. The food culture, language, music, calls to prayers, people attending churches, synagogues and mosques blended with each other spontaneously. The shoe maker, the baker, the tavern owner and the fishermen greeted the porter and the pauper. Although no one forfeited their national memory, rank, title, race, class and religion were not allowed to ruin alliances among cultures. Mahalle generated a culture of its own; mahalleli conformed with and followed the mahalle’s commonly held rules.

Tahta Minare Mescidi, located in Hızır Çavuş neighborhood, was built by the orders of Fatih Sultan Mehmet (Sultan Mehmet the Conqueror). Next to the building there was a fountain which was commissioned by Kanuni Sultan Süleyman. Not far from these two structures rose a cluster of smaller mosques, namely Kürkçü Mescidi, Çavuş Mescidi, Hoca Kasım Mescidi, (also known as Meydancık Mescidi), Divan and Balat İskelesi Camii (1766). Molla Aşık Camii (1735) took its name from the neighborhood and the poet who used to live there during the reign of Fatih Sultan Mehmet. Balat Camii (1562) was originally located within the “Ferruh Kethuda Külliyesi,” a religious complex with a school, a mosque, a religious order, a fountain and judicial courts. In the 1990s the mosque and the fountain were the only surviving remnants of the once-famed grand complex. Draman Camii which is located on top of a hill gazed at the city from the heights of Balat.

Scattered among clusters of small mosques, churches used to greet weary passengers. Ottoman tolerance for harmonious co-existence largely contributed
to the multi-religious identity of the town. The churches derived their names from the ethnic group and the culture which sustained them, such as Panaghia Balino, Surp Hresde Ağabet, Aghios Ionannis Prodromos, Aghia Strati. As they maintained their sacred identity and served their own community, for the non-Christian population they symbolized not only worship but places of gathering during seasons of joy, sorrow and celebration. Nevertheless neither side attached "political" agendas to their sacred places and their religious functions. Instead these places resonated with joy and humility as children ran in and out of their sanctified chambers. Stability shaped the general contours of a mutually rewarding social life in Balat and Fener until harmony and peaceful co-existence in the mahalle showed first signs of deterioration during the last quarter of the 19th century. Nationalist movements (both local and foreign) were going to shatter the closely-knit social texture of the mahalle and compromise its' once flourishing socioeconomic structure indefinitely.

However before the arrival of separatist movements, successful examples of inter-religious conversions took place in the neighborhood. Gül Camii (The Mosque of the Rose) in district of Fatih, in Ayakapi neighborhood (Gate of the Saint), is situated along Vakif Mektebi Sokak. Formerly it was an Eastern Orthodox church known as "Hagia Theodosia." More interestingly, in Balat's Molla Aşık neighborhood, a former Greek Orthodox Church was converted into an Armenian church while it was still surrounded by a largely Moslem enclave. The church (known as Surp Hresde Ağabet Armenian Church) and the nearby mosque (the Molla Aşık Mosque) had been long-time neighbors but the actual controversy set the Greek and Armenian population apart. Originally the building had belonged to the Greek Orthodox Church, and it was named Taksiarhis. In 1627 the church was bequeathed to the Armenians by the order of Sultan Murat IV, causing bad feelings among the Greeks. Partially destroyed by two consecutive fires (in 1692 and 1728), the structure was rebuilt on both occasions. In 1835 it closed its doors for a renovation project which was never completed.

In a large city which has a multitude of churches ranging from Syriac to Catholic, extraordinary examples of religious toleration and ethnic amalgamation exist. For instance Surp Nikogayos Church, (near Edirnekapi in Balat) lay on a disputed land. It is not clear whether the land or the building itself was owned by two different ethnic groups. However a Polish traveler named Simeon who lived in İstanbul from 1609 to 1618 observed that Greeks and Armenians attended the same church service in this building. Later in 1629 the church was converted into a mosque and re-named Kefeli Camii.

Foreign visitors' testimonies are usually reliable sources of information revealing different phases of İstanbul's multi-faceted ethnic character. Federico Gravina y Napoli, a Spanish sailor and Captain of the Royal Spanish fleet, came
to İstanbul on a battleship named Santa Rosa, on May 12, 1788. His mission was to transport the Turkish Ambassador Vassif Bey safely to İstanbul. During his one month stay in the city the Captain kept a journal which provided great insight about the multicultural joie de vivre of ethnic minorities in İstanbul during the last quarter of the 18th century.

Gravina's journal entries reflect a typical European learning experience as his wanderings in the city took him through narrow streets lined up with tiny stores, unpretentious mosques, adorned churches, silent synagogues, reputable tombs, busy marketplaces and bubbly residential areas. Gravina expressed his astonishment upon observing women,—“gypsies and Turkish women”—who had gathered in groups, walking, shopping and conversing without being escorted by men. His recurrent visits to the Covered Bazaar and the Hippodrome were exhilarating and disappointing at the same time: As he observed:

This place is vast but dark and has no beauty. In İstanbul most houses are small and ugly; they lean against each other; the streets too are ugly, dirty and disorderly due to the cobble-stones that cover their already crooked surfaces. There is only one major street which crosses over the whole city...We went to a place called “At Meydani,” (the Hippodrome). In the middle of it there is a smaller version of an obelisk, one that reminds me of Rome and Egypt!\(^{17}\)

Through interviews Gravina estimated that 11,000 Jewish families lived in Balat and around the neighboring shores of the Golden Horn. Jewish men, he remarked, were skilled in a variety of professions. The Sultan and majority of the Ottoman pashas traditionally trusted their military equipment and arsenals to officers among Jewish aristocracy. These findings must have been a shocking revelation for the Spanish Captain Federico Gravina y Napoli whose ancestors had expelled more than 500,000 Jews from Spain due to their religious intolerance and fanaticism in 1492. The Turkish Sultan had warmly welcomed the exiled Jews. For Gravina the contrast was striking. Moreover the Ottomans had employed Jews as smiths and ammunition experts. He remarked:

Most of them are either merchants themselves or they work for merchants on a commission basis. The head of the equipment depository for the Sultan’s Palace and his army is a Jew too. He is called “Bezirganbaşi.” All Ottoman generals employ Jewish Bezirganbaşi; this is why they (Jews) are so influential in the business world.\(^{18}\)

In his lengthy entries Gravina revealed his observations about different dress styles of ethnic minorities and instructed his reader how to “differentiate between a Jew, a Greek and a Turk.” As he visited the Sultan’s Palace, the Haghia Sophia,
walking around various mosques and neighborhoods of the city, Gravina praised the organization of the Ottoman army and the navy; religious customs of Turks; prettiness of Turkish women as well as the collegiality that existed among the multi-national masses in the city. Gravina's journal, though biased in certain aspects, provides valuable references for social life in Istanbul in the 1600s.

**Fener**

Called “Fanaraki” by Greeks and referred to as “Fanarion” during the Byzantine era, Fener’s residents were called “Fanariot” by other minorities in Istanbul. Turks called them “Rum.” The district took its name from the lighthouse which once rose on its empty shores. The youth were sent to Italy for language education; most of them could speak several languages including Italian, French, Greek and Latin. Upon their return they were offered several incentives by the Ottoman state. The translators who worked at Divan-i Hümâyûn (The Imperial Council) and Donanma-i Hümâyûn (The Imperial Fleet) were usually chosen among Greeks. They were usually appointed as directors or rulers of Eflak and Boğdan and promoted to the rank of “Bey” and “Beyzade” which entitled them to govern large Ottoman territories in the Balkans.

İlber Ortaylı remarks that Fener was historically open to all religions and languages. He asserts that throughout its long history as a multinational town, Fener gradually transformed itself from a barren sailor’s village to an international hub well-recognized with its trade relations in the Mediterranean world. About the immutable character of the town Ortaylı comments as follows:

During Byzantium’s heyday the crowds gathered at the wharf and formed a rowdy, disorganized, dirty image for Fener. At the same time, however, the town successfully managed to organize the relationships among its residents who came from different parts of the world. After all it was located at the crossroads of the world’s trade routes. The Venetian and Genoese merchants, Eastern European and the Asian tradesmen gathered in the streets of Fener. Following the Turkish conquest the ambassadorial residences and elegant houses were occupied by wealthy merchants and their large families who introduced colors and tastes of the Mediterranean into the streets of this once dilapidated neighborhood.

Ironically Fener owed its lasting legacy to Fatih Sultan Mehmet whose conquest was initially feared to bring an end to the old grandeur of the Greek
era not only in İstanbul but throughout Europe as well. As the members of a traditionally Greek-Orthodox town situated at the heart of a Muslim state, the Fanariot had enough reason to feel quite vulnerable. Since the foundation of the Eastern Roman Empire, Constantinople was viewed as the nerve-center of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate. Its central offices were originally located in the royal basilica of the Eastern Roman Empire, namely the invincible Haghia Sophia. However after the conquest the headquarters were moved to various smaller churches around the Golden Horn, until it was re-located at the present Church of St. George (built in 1720) on Sadrazam Ali Paşa Street in Fener.
Figure 11. Heybeli Ada Greek Orthodox High School. Photo by Zekai Erdal

Figure 12. Entrance to the Grand (Covered) Bazaar, Nur-u Osmaniye Gate. Photo by Nilgün Anadolu-Okur, January 2010.
Fatih Sultan Mehmet—A Visionary Leader

The day after the conquest, on May 29, 1453, Sultan Mehmet II realized he had a significant opportunity in his hands. The Greek residents of Constantinople had traditionally belonged to the upper classes of the society. They were employed as merchants, bankers, judges, architects, captains and artists. Whereas the new occupants of the city who accompanied the Sultan during the conquest of were primarily soldiers. Mehmet II was determined to maintain the superior level of enlightenment which the city was famous for throughout the world. His city would aspire, with its Muslim identity, to be culturally and economically advanced while it continued to be recognized as a vibrant metropolis of the civilized world. He would not allow the level of refinement and the renaissance sentiment which he had long admired in Constantinople vanish. The fate of the city and its multi-ethnic, multinational residents rested under his authority. As he was intent to maintain the status quo, he was particularly determined to sustain friendly relations with the Greek Orthodox world through its natural connection with the “Fanariot” of Istanbul.

Without doubt, the leader who chartered the course of history by influencing the global affairs of his era was fully capable of building the future of a city. First, he declared himself the “protector” of the Byzantine population in the city. Then he asked the leaders of the Greek congregation to elect a new patriarch in accordance with their traditions. Gennadios, whose actual name was Georghias Scholarius, was declared the new patriarch of the Greek Orthodox world. Moreover Fatih invited the newly elected patriarch to a splendid feast where he presented him with precious gifts. He asserted:

I want you to be the Patriarch and I will support you. May God Bless you and protect you. You can trust me under any circumstances. You will be able to benefit from all of the rights and privileges that are granted to others in this city.

He ordered his Grand Vizier to accompany Gennadios to the Church of the Apostles where he would take office. Later he issued a decree which stated: “No one is going to inconvenience the Patriarch. He will not be harassed or bothered by any one. Those who work for him and who have voted for him are exempt from public service and duties.” A golden staff, a pure-breed white horse and 400 duca in gold nuggets constituted the welcome gifts sent to the newly appointed patriarch.

By the time the new Patriarchate was well-established in Fener (circa 1602) the members of other minority groups,—the non-Greeks, Latino and Europeans, who used to live in Fener—were asked if they wanted to re-settle in Galata.
Meanwhile with an imperial decree, the last Latin Catholic church named St. Marie de Constantinople was converted, along with a few other churches, into mosques. It was reported that Faith's decision was based upon political rather than religious reasons. Historians report that during the conquest neither the city nor its residents suffered heavy losses. Casualties and looting were relatively small compared to the damage caused by the European crusades of the past decades. Reportedly 10,000 people who had locked themselves in Haghia Sophia soon surrendered and they were allowed to leave in peace. Contrary to European claims, Fatih did not enter the Haghia Sophia on his horse. Neither did the church's conversion into a mosque happen instantly. Fatih was reported to have personally conducted the first Friday prayer in Haghia Sophia on the third day of the conquest. Meanwhile Byzantium's last emperor Constantinos Dragenes' body was identified among martyred soldiers from both sides and it was given to the Greek congregation for a proper burial.

After the conquest, with Fatih's special decree Greeks not only became "citizens" of the Ottoman state but received numerous rights and privileges. Under this decree their churches—with one or two exceptions—were never to be converted into mosques. They would be able to follow their religious customs and perform their rituals according to the traditions of the Greek Orthodox Church. Subsequently Greeks owed their continued existence within the Ottoman Empire—particularly as a privileged group—to Fatih's extraordinary vision and superior diplomacy. In this regard the young Sultan set an example for future generations about ethnic tolerance, significance of diversity and cultural integration. Meanwhile the Greek aristocracy who had fled the city before the conquest was encouraged to return after they observed Sultan Mehmet's lenience toward the Patriarch and other non-Muslim assets in the city.

Included in the long-term plans of the Sultan was tackling the foreign policies of the European nations. He was keenly aware of the fact that the Greek Orthodox Church represented the only power which could prevent the imperialistic and expansionist ambitions of the Europeans. Almost entire Europe belonged to Catholic faith; they were obviously alarmed about the fall of Constantinople in mere 54 days which heralded the expansion of Islam, whose leader happened to be the 21 year-old Muslim conqueror of Constantinople!

Still, with these thoughts and concerns in mind, Fatih Sultan Mehmet was determined to maintain good relations with the Greek Orthodox Church, the Catholic Genovese and the Venetians who held significant economic ties with the rest of the world. He declared them his "close friends and allies" rather than his enemies; in return he expected to gain their respect and support. In order to avoid further aversion against his rule Fatih sought to become a peace-maker. During his thirty-year rule (1451-1481), as a diplomat and a clever statesman
Fatih sheltered the ethnic and religious groups within the Ottoman state through implementing a general trust in the supremacy of law and sovereignty of the state in delegation of his executive and legislative powers.

Following the course set by Fatih's generosity, which they continuously benefited from, Greeks demonstrated the same level of consideration towards non-Orthodox people who settled in their neighborhoods. The presence of numerous small mosques in the midst of Fener's traditionally Greek neighborhoods—including Aliyazici Mescidi and Mesnevihane Mescidi—indicate the presence of religious harmony and mutual trust between the two cultures. Gravina mentioned that there were at least 16,000 to 17,000 Greek families who lived in Fener and Golden Horn at the time of his visit to Istanbul. He remarked that in addition to one large church (which he calls a "cathedral") in the city, Greeks had built three other churches in Fener district alone.23

Conclusion

In the age of globalization Fatih's vision and egalitarian policy clearly intersects with the boundaries of the proverbial global village and resonates with conjectures which have been developed to establish feasible and sustainable international policies among nations. At the time of the conquest Fatih had fully recognized the "critical need...for dialogue, analysis, and visioning" among ethnic groups in Istanbul.24 At a personal level he possessed a heightened awareness of the larger world, yet he was also conscientious of the critical role he might play in changing the course of history. As a global leader he valued diversity; besides he had the capacity "to empower and inspire groups, work through conflicts, and generate new insights that increase effectiveness."25 He disliked injustice and did not tolerate ethnic prejudice or racial discrimination. He demonstrated a genuine interest in the well-being of his citizens and encouraged their contributions, Muslim or non-Muslim alike, to the collective happiness of the state and the world.26

Consequently, the immutable characteristics that Istanbul inherited from its Greek, Roman, Byzantine and Ottoman past sustained the longevity of its culture partly because of individual efforts which were geared to maintain stability not only within the state but throughout the entire world. Along with the human effort, elements of cultural determinants such as cosmological, epistemological, axiological and aesthetic dimensions have contributed to the acculturation process maintaining an irresistibly natural alliance among its inhabitants.

Today at the heart of Istanbul's historic district two colossal structures illuminate the evening sky as bright stars do. They keep gazing at each other as the sun sets over their minarets. SeaGulls circle their heights and forgotten voices echo through their aging archways. With their majestic domes and weighty pillars
the church and the mosque reach towards each other in a warm embrace; they are one with One. Both stand witness to the imperial legacy of past civilizations. They have survived through ordinary hostilities, secret plots and conspiracies, yet in the due process they have inspired grand alliances. The church and the mosque stand tall and proud as living testimonies to truth, justice, righteousness, dignity and harmony among men and women. They muse over weary travelers and dignitaries of antiquity who had once entered through their magnificent gates with eyes of wonder and hearts of compassion. Nowadays curious tourists attempt to duplicate their acts with little success.

Despite the cheerfully loud crowds who pack their courtyards the two old friends do not whimper nor do they resist. Instead they welcome strangers and quietly exchange looks. They seem to be determined to keep their silent vigil about guarding peace and harmony in this part of the world, even during times of strife. Conspiracies or events of discord which threaten stability among racial, ethnic and religious groups of modern civilizations do not frighten them. They have no fear. Day after day, under rain and snow, the leafy square and its merry fountain narrate the story of a secret alliance between the church and the mosque. On an ordinary day, under a blue Istanbul sky, the endless routine of shuttle busses delivers visitors into the gardens that adorn the elliptical silhouette of the ancient hippodrome which unites the church and the mosque. People wander from one monument to the other. Strangers to this realm, they enter with anxious minds. But when they leave—and if they ever leave—peace and serenity have taken over their souls. Their qualms are gone; the alliances they have observed in Istanbul have informed them thoroughly. Now that they have been infinitely enlightened, they have a chance to liberate and be liberated as well.

Endnotes

4 Ibid., 10.
5 Mango, 10.
6 Mango, 11.
7 Ibid.


12 İstanbul: Eye Witness Travel Guides, London: DK, 74.

13 Doğan Kuban, “İstanbul Kültürünün Belirsizliği,” in *İstanbul*, (Eminönü, İstanbul: Tarih Vakfı), 1992, Nr. 3. 158.


15 Deleon, 69.

16 Ibid., 70.


18 Ibid, 136.

19 İlber Ortaylı, “Fener'de Tarih: 1,500 Yıllık Tarihlin Sıkıştığı Bir Dünya Tiyatrosu,” In *İstanbul’da Sayfalar*, (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 1986), 105-113; 105.

20 Ibid., 113.

21 Deleon, 121-122.


23 Arseven, 58.

24 Gravina, 134.


26 Ibid.


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