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Diversity and the nature of the Ottoman Empire

From the construction of the imperial old regime to the challenges of modernity

Nora Lafi

The Ottoman landscape of diversity

Diversity in the Ottoman Empire, from Tunis to Baghdad and from Sarajevo to Mecca, was part of the basic features of the organization of social life. Not only were provinces of very different cultures part of this political construction, with populations of very different ethnic and religious backgrounds, but also at the local scale diversity was very often an important characteristic, with cities and villages assembling very different groups. Almost nowhere in the Empire was there what could be seen as a situation of homogeneity. Diversity was everywhere, at every scale, and this diversity of the population has been part of the very nature of the Empire since its beginning. The Ottoman Empire has been built progressively upon a heritage of diversity, with some elements taken from the Byzantine tradition and others from the Medieval Islamic, for example the Persian tradition. Coexistence was a condition necessary for the very existence of the Empire, and ethnic and religious diversity was dealt with as part of the basic elements of governance. There were in the Empire dozens of groups, like the Greeks, the Turks, the Arabs, among which a strong Christian element, the Jews, the Armenians, the Europeans in the cities of North Africa, the Maltese, the Serbs, the Bulgars, the Black Africans, the Roma, the Berbers, the Kurds, the Tuareg, the Caucasians (like the Georgians or the Abkhazians), the Mongols . . . . Within these categories, of which one should not have a too static vision as identities were ductile, diversity also existed, such as between Coptic and Levantine Christians, Arab, Andalusian, Berber and Eastern European Jews, or even Greeks from the different parts of the Mediterranean. The Ottoman Empire was in no way a Turkish empire, and the notion of Turk itself was quite vague, covering both the descendants of migrants from Central Asia and myriad people from Anatolia. Very often someone could be perceived and described as a Turk, as he was representing the Ottoman Empire in a province, but would himself have a more complex identity, like in the case of Georgian, Circassian, Serb or even Greek governors or officers. There were also the classes of imperial servants, generally orphans or cadets from the Caucasus, who have long embodied, like the Janissaries, the Empire in the provinces. With the system of the Devshirme boarding schools, pupils from everywhere in the Empire and beyond were given an Ottoman
education. Identities were also quite complex among those who converted, with religion and ethnicity not always matching automatically, for example in the case of Greek, Georgian, Armenian or Serb Muslim imperial officers. In many provinces inter-marriage also brought more complexity in diversity, with for example the Kuluglis of Algiers or Tripoli, the sons of marriages between Ottoman officers and women from local families.

Ottoman diversity was also characterized by a remarkable mosaic of languages. The Ottoman language (Osmanlı) was of course the dominant administrative idiom, but at the local scale local languages were always respected, even for imperial administration. Almost all Ottoman subjects, of all social milieux, lived in an atmosphere of pluri-linguistic realities, often using one language for family affairs, another for commerce or administration and another one again for cultural practices. For many Jews of Salonica, for example, Ladino was an everyday language, Greek and Turkish were used for business (along with other Mediterranean languages) and ancient Hebrew was used in the Synagogue. The Ottoman system was based upon the governance of hierarchized differences and not upon equality (this concept was inexistnet in the contemporary political thinking of the time), and was marked by numerous episodes of conflict. Even if one overlooked the irenic visions of the coexistence between all Ottoman groups, the fact is that coexistence in the Ottoman context was the object of a complex and efficient system of regulation. The understanding of this system poses a certain number of conceptual challenges, pertaining not only to the interpretation of the nature of the Ottoman governance of diversity, but also to the nature of the Empire itself. This means that the Ottoman case is crucial to present-day studies of diversity and is worthy of renewed attention by scholars, albeit from a different angle of interpretation. The interpretation of the state of diversity in the Ottoman Empire has indeed long been made according to a conceptual dichotomy between the medieval heritage and the nineteenth-century situation. Little attention was generally given to the construction of interpretative paradigms centred on the core period of the Empire itself.

The Ottoman old regime governance of diversity

The governance of diversity in the Ottoman Empire was the result of the complex and progressive construction of a whole set of legal regulations and of locally negotiated practices. The Empire was in no way a block of bureaucratic homogeneity but was rather a complex and constantly renegotiated construction (Barkey 2008). It was in the very nature of this old regime style of governance to comprise general rules as well as local privileges or adaptations. From the very beginning, the construction of the imperial apparatus comprised a decisive acceptance of previously recognized rules, regulations and privileges. But this fact does not mean that the Ottoman Empire’s approach to diversity was passive: the integration of previous negotiations was part of a dynamic renegotiation and of the construction of the imperial ideology, itself much more complex than just a mix of Byzantine and Islamic heritages. At the scale of the Empire, diversity was regulated according to a specific legal framework, based upon the system of the protection of members of religions other than Islam. Inspired by the medieval Islamic concept of dhimmi protection, this Ottoman interpretation comprised many dimensions, from taxation to civic rights (Masters 2004). The basic principle was that members of non-Muslim communities were subject to specific taxes, tasks or exemptions according to the community. Non-Muslims were not authorized to access the highest charges of public service. At the scale of the Empire, the system of the millet embodied the Ottoman vision of diversity: the members of a specific confessional community were affiliated by way of their judicial and legal status to this larger organization (Ursinus 1989). The main ones, besides the Islamic Millet, were the Christian Millet (Rum, established as early as 1453), the Armenian Millet and the Jewish Millet. Between the
sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, many adaptations and corrections were made to this system, resulting from negotiations with specific groups. New millets were sometimes created in order to adapt to diversity inside a community, as well as to new political, spiritual or social stakes. But the interpretation of diversity in the Ottoman Empire should not be made only at this scale of general principles and distant institutions, even if there was always a strong symbolic and practical relation between members of single communities and their hierarchies in Istanbul. Debates are still ongoing between historians, but it seems that, for example, the Jewish Hahambasılık was more the head of the Jewish community in the capital city and the symbolic representative of all the Jews of the Empire in front of the Sultan than the actual chief of all Jewish communities (Aydingün and Dardag˘ an 2006). Most crucial were not only local interpretations of general rules on the governance of diversity, as well as the interaction with other principles of social organization, pertaining to local communities but also to professional bodies like guilds, which could be inter-confessional, to territorial entities, like villages or quarters, which could also be inter-confessional, or to specific social constructions, like tribes, which in the Ottoman Empire were not a static category pertaining to anthropology only, but also an evolving category of social regulation. Diversity was always in an Ottoman context dealt with as part of the fundamental dimensions of local societies. The Ottoman system should not be seen as something like the meeting point between general rules and local specificities, but rather as a mutual social, administrative, political and symbolic construct in which decisions resulted from both the sedimentation of acknowledged exceptions and the dynamic negotiation of equilibrium in the interpretation of this heritage for the present.

Among the most important aspects of the Ottoman governance of diversity was the delegation of imperial functions to local notables, either rural, urban or confessional. Cities were recognized as collective bodies, the governance of which was largely delegated to local notables. In this framework, confessional communities were recognized as official entities too, in charge not only of regulating social life inside the community, but also of various tasks, fiscal or pertaining to public order. Imperiality was embedded into this dimension of diversity, and functioned not just in an external or supervisory capacity. In this way, Ottoman cities, most of which were marked by a complex mosaic of confessional and ethnic identities, were an essential element in the fashioning of imperialism. Each community had its local chief, like the sheikh al-Yahûd for the Jews of Arab cities, but so did each quarter and each guild. As in many old regime systems, an overlap between all these dimensions was typical. For example, a Jewish carpenter living in a mixed neighbourhood could depend for the various aspects of his social life on the Chief of the Jewish community, the hierarchy of his guild and the chief of his quarter. There were as many declensions of this scheme as there were possibilities of crossing elements of diversity in cities between the confessional, sometimes the ethnic or tribal, the professional and the spatial dimensions. Those dimensions rarely matched. The capital city itself, Istanbul, was in no way a mirror of a mythical imperial homogeneous vision. The Ottoman court itself was pluri-ethnic and multi-lingual, encompassing from the very beginning of the Empire the Sultanic tradition of marrying foreign (Greek, for example) princes, or the integration of bureaucrats of various origins into the Ottoman government. In the city, the Greek element remained extremely important until the end of the Empire, and all the languages of the provinces could be heard in the streets. Outside of the cities, the delegation of local power to local tribes, nomad groups or village assemblies was most common. This resulted in daily interaction between elements of various natures, and also in the complex situation of an imperial governance of diversity in which internal hierarchies were recognized as active elements of social organization.

The coexistence of groups of various origins, religions or identities, however, should not be seen as an innate feature or as the easy result of the system described here. It was rather the result
of a constant effort of social and political mediation. In the case of a flagrant injustice, all individuals or groups were entitled to petition either locally to the governor or directly to the Sultan in Istanbul. This petitioning system was also the main feature of imperial governance, with entire bureaux in the capital city dealing with the resolution of local conflicts, the degeneration of which could challenge the local declension of imperality. The Ottoman imperial administrative old regime apparatus grew from this basis. Conflict prevention and resolution was one of the main tasks of the imperial administration. Of course, this did not always succeed, and rebellions, local wars and sometimes inter-confessional episodes of violence are not absent from Ottoman history. But there were also local features of canalization of potential expressions of violence that generally allowed dealing with inter-confessional or inter-ethnic animosity. When it happened, it was generally the sign of a rupture in the equilibrium of the local form of imperality in the context of the negotiation of a change or of the emergence of strong internal and/or external challenges. This is what happened in the nineteenth century with the implementation of major reforms in the system of governance of diversity, in the context of the emergence of new ideas on modernity and of a new form of influence of foreign powers.

The challenges of modernity

The first great imperial reform that had a strong impact on the relationship between the Empire and the locality, with consequences on how diversity was managed, is that of the system of the Janissaries, in 1826, which followed, but also induced, several decades of troubles. The Janissaries were themselves a corps embodying the diversity of the Empire that had in old regime times had a strong local role in many provinces. The Janissaries were generally the sons of Christian families from Anatolia or the Balkans (Greeks, Armenians, Georgians, Serbs), recruited in their childhood in order to become servants of the Empire. They were given a high-level military and technical education and formed not only an elite military corps of the Sultan, but also one of the most efficient bodies of administrators and technicians working for the Empire. The defence of their privileges led them to resist all imperial efforts to reform the army. Following a series of revolts and two decades of tension, the corps of the Janissaries was violently suppressed in 1826. This not only changed the way diversity was envisaged at the scale of the Empire, but also led to a crisis of local identity in several provinces. Another challenge to the Ottoman system was the secession of Greece, which, although it had begun as a rather classical revolt, became the symbol of the emergence of a new kind of national sentiment. The growth of such national sentiments was a major challenge for the Empire, not only at the scale of its geostrategic coherence, but also at that of the very mix of diversity in almost every city and village. With nationalism increasingly becoming a category of political thought, every Greek, Armenian, Kurd, Serb, or (later) Arab or Jewish subject of the Empire faced a new identity dilemma, juxtaposing his Ottoman belonging on one side and his communal or ethnic belonging on the other. The seizure in 1830 of the Ottoman province of Algeria by France, following the Napoleonic invasion of Egypt in 1798, and in general the growth of colonial European appetites for Ottoman provinces, added another dimension to this major shift, with diversity becoming the site of a complex entanglement of stakes and scales of intimate identitities, local and imperial logics and geopolitical games. All these changes, combined with the emergence of new philosophical conceptualizations of individual identity, represented profound challenges to the previous system of Ottoman governance of diversity. A new perception of the ‘other’, with the influence of ethnic based typologies as developed in Europe, also had an impact on how diversity was conceived. With the growing reification of categories, religious or ethnic, that were previously much more ductile and part of the old regime regulation, this system came to the point of being totally unmanageable. This
situation, resulting from the complex mix of concerns – military for the defence of the most vulnerable provinces, political for the tackling of the new identity mosaic of the Empire and local relating to the tensions that emerged following the growth of adverse national or communal sentiments – explains the launch in the 1830s of a series of reforms at the scale of the Empire known as the Tanzimat.

The spirit of the Tanzimat was to adapt the Ottoman Empire to a new situation. As far as diversity was concerned, changes in the definition of the self and in the conceptualization of political representation induced a necessary reform of the millet system (Karpat 1982). But even if the reforms that were enacted during the 1850s and the 1860s were aimed at replacing the communal definition of the self by a more universal one creating modern citizenship, opening more widely the sphere of governance to non-Muslims, they did not totally succeed in solving all previous ambiguities. The Imperial Rescript of Gülhane of 1839 established the equality of all Ottoman subjects before the law regardless of their religion. In 1856, the Imperial Reform Rescript also improved the legal status of non-Muslims and introduced the principle of fiscal equality between Muslims and non-Muslims. Scholars have underlined how this decision on the one hand represented a path towards equality but on the other tended to deprive communal notables of part of their powers, notably those that were associated with principles of taxation inside the community (Aydingün and Dardag˘ an 2006). The 1856 imperial Rescript also opened up government offices and administrative bureaucratic services to a more general participation of non-Muslims. In 1865, the Organic Law of the Empire confirmed these principles, and throughout the 1860s a series of decisions granted to the Greek-Orthodox, Armenian and Jewish Millets a new range of competences at the scale of the Empire, with the consequence of tending somehow to centralize communal life. The 1869 code of Ottoman nationality defined nationality as being attached to all subjects of the Sultan without consideration of religion or ethnicity. Article 8 of the 1876 constitution confirmed this important principle: ‘all subjects of the Empire are called Ottoman, without distinction, whatever their religion’.

Just as it would be too simplistic to see this modernization and reform effort as a mere dynamic of ‘westernization’, it would not be satisfactory to examine it only at the scale of such general principles. Most of the ambiguities of the reforms and of the tensions they created are to be analyzed indeed at the local scale. In cities of the Empire, for example, the implementation of the municipal reforms was the object of strong conflicts between the Empire and the old elite who struggled to see their old regime powers transferred into the new one. At the urban scale, the reforms meant not only a redefinition of the self and of collective identities, but also a renegotiation of the power of all notables to which old regime governance had been delegated for centuries. The transitions from the old regime assemblies of notables and the mosaic of communal institutions to reformed municipalities (and reformed communal institutions, as well as reformed courts of justice) were far from easy. Even if representation was based upon property, a fact which granted Muslim old regime notables a good position in the new system, the negotiation of adaptation was an occasion for tension. The impact of modernity is thus ambiguous. This is also the case with respect to the relationship between Ottomanity and the role of foreigners. Indeed, ambiguities in many cities of the Empire derived from the fact that on the one hand a certain number of Ottoman subjects had been seeking foreign consular protection (British or French mainly) and that on the other foreign consuls pushed for modernizing reforms in order to grant new rights (notably property rights) to foreigners. The distinction between Ottoman non-Muslims, ex-Ottoman protégés and Europeans tended to become increasingly less obvious, a fact that undermined the spirit of equality and its local implementation. The impact of the Ottoman reforms on diversity is therefore more complex than just the clash between the imperial idea and the growth of nationalism of all sorts. The position of the various groups in the
Empire had to be redefined, from Greeks to Bulgars, Armenians to Jews and Turks to Arabs. But the clash between an incomplete form of Ottoman modernity and predation attempts by foreign powers also instrumentalized the differences. The revendication of rights for foreigners by foreign consuls interfered with the evolution of the consideration of the rights of non-Muslim Ottoman subjects. The 1858 code of property, and the local conflicts and sometimes riots it created, is an illustration of this crucial dimension. From Tunisia to Egypt, Ottoman modernization interfered with colonial stakes. This is why the crisis of the Ottoman governance of diversity that characterized the end of the nineteenth century and was marked by a series of violent incidents, including massacres in the Levant and riots in numerous Ottoman cities from the Balkans to North Africa, should be analyzed according to a complex grid of questioning that includes dimensions pertaining not only to the passage from old regime definitions of diversity to modern ones based on more universal principles, but also to the variety of challenges imperial Ottomanity itself was confronted with, from nationalism to colonialism.

Conclusion

With the fall of the Ottoman Empire after World War I, a period itself characterized by the massacre of the Armenian population in the Empire, the question of diversity in the post-Ottoman world evolved into a situation marked by a logic of segregation and separation. In what became republican Turkey, the ideological construction of Turkishness as an ethnic feature became the cement of the new regime. Exchanges of populations between Greece and Turkey resulted in the construction of both national territories as ethnically coherent entities. In the Balkans, the mosaic of populations became for a century almost the instrument of a clash of contrasting nationalisms. And in the rest of the Empire, under colonial domination (some provinces since the nineteenth century), different logics of segregation prevailed. From Algeria, where French occupation resulted in the implementation of a violent regime of segregation, with the colonial emancipation of Algerian Jews being instrumentalized in this framework, to mandatory Syria and Lebanon where the French used communal diversity as an instrument of power, or to mandatory Palestine, where Zionism as a new form of territorial and ethnic nationalism clashed both with British colonial rule and with local populations and their heritage of governance of diversity, the post-Ottoman panorama of diversity is dominated by the end of coexistence and by the growing force of separation and segregation as governance tools. The challenge for research therefore is to tackle both the historical reality of the governance of diversity in Ottoman times and its ambiguous memory. Between various forms of both neo-Ottomanism and post-colonialism, this memory is indeed subject to highly politicized interpretations. This is why any research agenda for the future should take into account a set of various considerations. First, the necessity to analyze the Ottoman period as such, and not as the mere intermediary between Islamic Middle Ages and colonization or independences, with a focus on the relationship between the imperial and the local spheres. In this framework, paying attention to the actual evolution of the participation of non-Muslim notables to urban civic life, as well as to the evolution of inner-communal life, is crucial. Second, there is today a need for research on the nature of the Ottoman reforms, mostly on the interaction between reformative impulses and the complex situation at the local scale. And third, as far as the post-Ottoman world is concerned, up to present debates in the Balkans or in Palestine, there seems to be a need to reverse the logic of genealogical research that tends to reify categories that were not necessarily relevant in Ottoman times, or at least that had a quite different meaning and content. Instead, in digging into Ottoman times from the post-Ottoman situation of fragmentation, ethnic segregation or separation, which implies certain angles of interpretation and a fragmentation of
research between Jewish, Greek, Balkan, Arab or Armenian studies, what seems most important nowadays for research is to tackle the Ottoman situation as such. After decades of historical research going in the direction of understanding the logics of nationalisms, another perspective might also be, without ambiguous and naive forms of Ottomanist nostalgia, to study how the idea of Ottomanity was present in societies throughout the Empire during all the phases described here. Not everything was written in 1850, or even in 1910.

References


