

The Cologne and the Mask: Metaphors of Modern Turkey under the Pandemic

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Introduction

The dilemma between an ideologically re-invented past of Ottoman greatness - which "legitimizes" the greatness of today's Turkey - and the economic and social realities, as they are shaped by the pandemic, is highlighted from a Turkish video spot for the pandemic, broadcasted on social media².

Through a white bag, which reads "Presidency of the Turkish Republic" and below "Recep Tayyip Erdogan", two hands with medical gloves pull out a "Bogazici" brand cologne box and a smaller bag from the Turkish clothing brand LC Waikiki with medical masks. The music in the background is in the rhythms of oriental pop and venerates Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Indeed, these two objects perfectly symbolize the identity aspirations of the current Turkish government. Cologne, «kolonya» in Turkish, is a national traditional aromatic fragrance with origins going back to Ottoman period and LC Waikiki is a very successful Turkish clothing company owned by a conservative businessman who greatly benefited from the AKP rule.

² Yenicag newspaper, "One cologne, one mask. The Presidency's aid packages" (in Turkish) www.yenicaggazetesi.com.tr/mobi/1-kolonya-bir-maske-cumhurbaskanligi-yardim-paketleri-273658h.htm Date Accessed: 04 April 2020

Cultural struggle

The mobilization of cultural objects, especially through headgear and clothing, has been recurrent within the Turkish political and social lives since the reforms of the late Ottoman Empire and later with Ataturk's reforms³. But since late 1990s, with the increasing empowerment of the conservative Muslims, "Islamists", of the periphery to the detriment of the secularist "Kemalist" state and social elites, cultural objectification has become one of the most powerful expression of the ever-growing cultural struggle for the soul of Turkey⁴.

At the heart of this continuous emergence and re-appropriations of cultural objects lies the race of a new process of mythopoeia: the creation of anti-myths and anti-narratives by the rising conservatives in order to construct a symbolic and emotional legitimation of their dominance and of their status in the center of political and social power⁵.

By re-defining the past and by mobilizing the tradition as an authentic Turkish "shield" against the coronavirus, through the cultural objectification of the "kolonya", and by portraying the conservative entrepreneurs as protectors of the health of the nation and as vehicles of social solidarity, the health kit of the video spot is endorsing the continuity and the vigor of the ongoing cultural struggle in Turkey. At the same time, it reveals the asymmetry between myth and reality, between a glorified Ottoman/Turkish past and the hard realities of the present as

³ Lewis, Bernard, *The Middle East*, Phoenix Press, London, 2000; Seal, Jeremy, *A Fez of the Heart: Travels around Turkey in Search of a Hat*, Mariner Books, London, 1996

⁴ Kandiyoti, Deniz & Saktander, Ayse (Ed), *Fragments of Culture. The everyday of modern Turkey*, I.B. Tauris, London, 2002; White, Jenny, *Islamist Mobilization in Turkey, A study in vernacular politics*, University of Washington Press, Seattle, 2002

⁵ Hintz, Lisel, *Identity Politics Inside Out: National Identity Contestation and Foreign Policy in Turkey*, Oxford University Press, London, 2018

well as the fact that the interests of the conservative businessmen and the conservative middle classes and those of their secularist counterparts are steadily converging.

Recep Tayyip Erdogan has to choose between an imperial and contemporary myth of Turkey's global power and the pragmatism of securing the Turkish economy and ultimately the survival of the social groups that brought him to and keep him in power the last seventeen years. The Turkish economy is at a turning point, and a growing number of voices inside the country are urging Ankara to turn to the International Monetary Fund, implying that there is no other real option for the country to avoid the worst-case scenario⁶. This is something that the Turkish President and his government not only continuously rule out but also have almost stigmatized as a humiliating surrender to the West and its prerequisites⁷.

However, if such a negative scenario for the economy is realized, a very significant part of the AKP's supporters will suffer a substantial financial setback, which will directly threaten the economic and social acquis of the middle and upper classes of conservative Muslims and businessmen. Indeed, the aid pack is a very symbolic metaphor of this dilemma facing the Turkish President today, and its cultural objects and their meanings are revealing of the current Turkish political and cultural landscape and its inherent tensions.

⁶ Bobby Ghosh, Bloomberg, "Turkey's Erdogan should break his taboo on the IMF", www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2020-04-20/turkey-s-erdogan-should-break-his-taboo-on-imf-aid, Date Accessed: 20 April 2020 ; Hilal Sari, Dunya newspaper, "Swap, repo, this didn't happen either, IMF a must" (in Turkish) www.dunya.com/finans/haberler/swap-repo-o-da-olmadi-imf-sart-haberi-467266 ; Date Accessed: 09 April 2020

⁷ Pitel, Laura, Financial Times, Turkey rejects any suggestion of IMF help www.ft.com/content/7c9d9851-58cf-4561-9e8e-24dca0e6866e ; Date Accessed: 12 April 2020 Kostidis, Manolis, Independent Balkan News Agency, Erdogan: "We will not bow down before IMF" ; www.balkaneu.com/erdogan-we-will-not-bow-down-before-imf/ ; Date Accessed 13 April 2020

Imperial cologne

The TV spot first takes the "Bogazici" cologne out of the Presidency's bag. The famous Turkish cologne has been one of the most advertised Turkish "weapons" against the virus since the beginning of the pandemic, as its content is 80 percent alcohol, while at the same time it is an integral part of Turkish life and culture. Even a very large number of devout Muslims, who systematically avoid alcohol, use cologne.

Cologne is the perfect symbol of neo-Ottomanism (or *Ottoman Islamism*, according to some scholars). This relatively new ideological construction that links the present day Turkey with the Ottoman imperial legacy and has become the main instrument of today's ruling elites for domestic identity contestation in the struggle between "Islamists" and "Kemalists" as well as the main guiding principle of the new, assertive Turkish foreign policy⁸.

Cologne unites the glorious Ottoman past with the nation. It is a local and national (*yerli ve milli*) product that could save the world in a time of crisis and shows the uniqueness of the Turkish culture.

Cologne came to Turkey during the reign of Abdulhamid II, the reactionary Sultan who ruled the ailing Empire between 1876 and 1909, whom Recep Tayyip Erdogan admires and who has emerged as one of the strongest cultural and political references of the AKP and of "New Turkey"⁹.

⁸ Hintz, Lisel, *Identity Politics Inside Out: National Identity Contestation and Foreign Policy in Turkey*, Oxford University Press, London, 2018

⁹ Aydintasbas, Asli, Washington Post, "Turkey's political map is shifting. Is the country ready to shake off Erdogan's reign?" www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/12/15/turkeys-political-map-is-shifting-is-country-ready-shake-off-erdogans-reign/ ; Date Accessed: 15 December 2019

Abdulhamit II was obsessively centralizing power but at the same time he was very open to all the technological advances of the West, he was the Sultan who brought the railroad and the telegraph to the Ottoman Empire, while he was a lover of opera and European aesthetics. When he discovered the cologne, the "Water of Cologne", "Eau de Cologne", from the German city of Cologne, he decided to bring it and produce it in his Empire. He changed its composition somewhat, combining the Muslim tradition of rose water with the German and French tradition of aromatic alcohol, and introduced the cologne, «*kolonya*» in Turkish, in Ottoman and Turkish culture.

Ever since cologne, has become a timeless component of the Turkish hospitality tradition, in homes and restaurants and in various ceremonies and gives a strong sense of nostalgia and care. The "Bogazici" brand, Bosphorus, is considered the best but there are many others.

As the crisis hit, the Turkish Health Minister, authorities and doctors have mobilized the cologne in the fight against COVID-19, which seem to be a highly efficient sanitizer, and its sales have exploded.

The tradition, and more specifically a tradition that was constructed during Abdulhamit II reign, comes from the Ottoman past to fight the virus at a time when Ankara's narrative is that in the new, post-pandemic, world order, Turkey will emerge as one of the most powerful countries.

This neo-Ottomanist narrative is transformed into action in foreign policy with Ankara sending medical aid to many countries, including EU member states, and publicizing it systematically in the local media, with an angle that portrays weak EU states and a strong Turkey sending them help.

Social Rise of "Islamists"

After the cologne, the gloved hands take out a small bag that reads "LC Waikiki" and from it medical masks. LC Waikiki is one of the most iconic examples of the economic success and social ascension of conservative Muslims of the «periphery» during and after the Turgut Ozal period. The company was originally founded by a French designer and in 1997, the charismatic Turkish businessman Mustafa Kucuk¹⁰ and his associates bought it to make it one of the most successful Turkish clothing companies in the world.

Kucuk, born and raised in Malatya in the 1960s, studied engineering and began working in the textile industry in the 1980s. When buying LC Waikiki, he had the vision that "everyone deserves to dress well", a clear reference to Turkey's class and ideological dynamics in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when "Islamists" began to rise socially.

Alongside their social ascent, conservative Muslims began to pay more and more attention to their dressing, to modernize, and to want access to fashionable, but not necessarily expensive clothes¹¹. LC Waikiki came and filled exactly this need and today it is one of the main points of sale of clothes for the lower middle and middle classes of conservatives while Kucuk is one of the richest billionaires in Turkey.

LC Waikiki is the symbol of the social rise of the conservatives of the "periphery" who were looked down from the republican, "Kemalist", elites and who draw their

¹⁰ #1267 Mustafa Kucuk, Forbes www.forbes.com/profile/mustafa-kucuk/ ; Date Accessed: 26 April 2020

¹¹ Cinar, Alev, Modernity, Islam and secularism in Turkey. Bodies, Places and Time, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, 2005

identity from the Muslim tradition of Anatolia and not from the "West" of the "Kemalist" elites.

Along with the Ottoman and Turkish tradition of the cologne, the Turkish entrepreneurs, who have achieved an incredible economic and class feat and who are today equal driving forces of the Turkish economy with the old "Kemalist" big families of the business world, are mobilizing against the pandemic.

"Achilles' heel"

However, while the cologne does not appear to be particularly at risk from a scenario of deteriorating Turkish economy, successful conservative entrepreneurs as well as middle and upper class conservatives will be directly threatened if the government does not take the necessary measures to shield the economy. The threat they face will not only be economic, but also social and of class because if the country's economy goes into turmoil, social dynamics in Turkey will change and many supporters of the Turkish president may lose their social and class gains.

In recent years a new group has made its appearance in Turkish politics: the dissatisfied conservative middle classes¹². This term refers to an apparently growing number, according to some pollsters, of conservative urbanized middle classes who become gradually alienated from AKP and President Erdogan. This group includes also a growing number of younger generations of conservatives

¹² T24 internet site (in Turkish), "Bekir Ağırdir: Conservatives suffer mass rupture from the AK Party, most of the voters are in the gray area", <https://t24.com.tr/video/bekir-agirdir-muhafazakar-kitlede-cok-buyuk-bir-kitlesel-kopus-var-secmenin-cogunlugu-gri-alanda,26283> ; Date Accessed: 12 February 2020 ; Al Jazeera Center for Studies, "Turkish municipal elections: AKP victory tastes like defeat in major cities", <https://studies.aljazeera.net/en/positionpapers/2019/04/turkish-municipal-elections-akp-victory-tastes-defeat-major-cities-190404104930606.html> ; Date Accessed: 4 April 2019

who do not have the same memories and traumas of their parents and who tend to identify themselves less with the new dominant myths and more with a westernized modernity, in its individualistic and multicultural essence, even if this modernity is systematically re-appropriated in traditional terms¹³.

A significant degradation of the economic and social power of these dissatisfied middle classes, the LC Waikiki main consumers and symbol bearers, would deepen the gap of their alienation with AKP and could create a fertile ground for the newly formed right wing parties.

Hence, the video spot, while it tries to mobilize the nation by recasting its new myths and to consolidate support, is paradoxically revealing the “Achilles’ heel” of the Turkish President and his party. And ultimately invites them to choose between an ambitious imperial view of the past, present and future and the economic and social survival of their supporters, eventually through the IMF and surely through a new association with the West.

¹³ Angeletopoulos, George, Areteos, Evangelos, Turkey: The train of the big modernization (in Greek), Papadopoulos editors, Athens, 2019 ;
Konda research, “What Has Changed In Youth In 10 Years?”
<https://interaktif.konda.com.tr/en/Youth2018/#firstPage> ; Date Accessed: 2 April 2020